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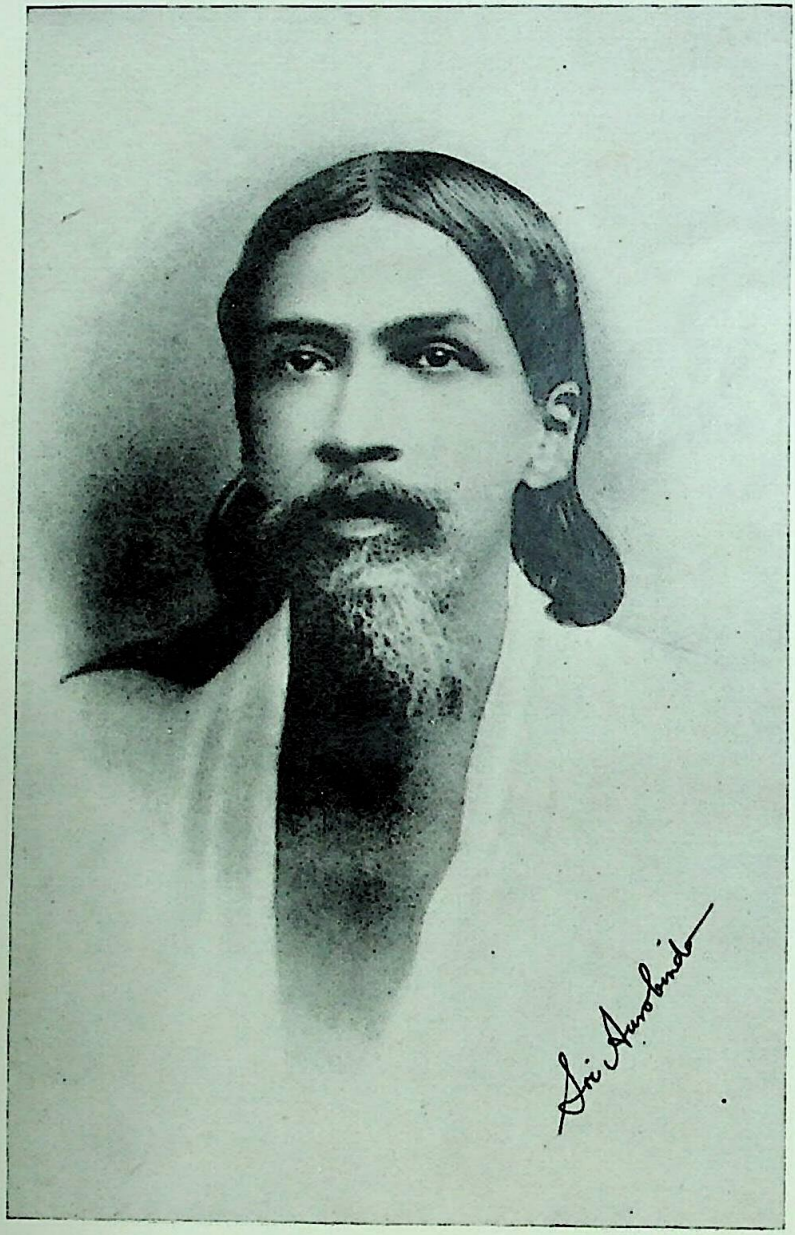

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SRI AUROBINDO

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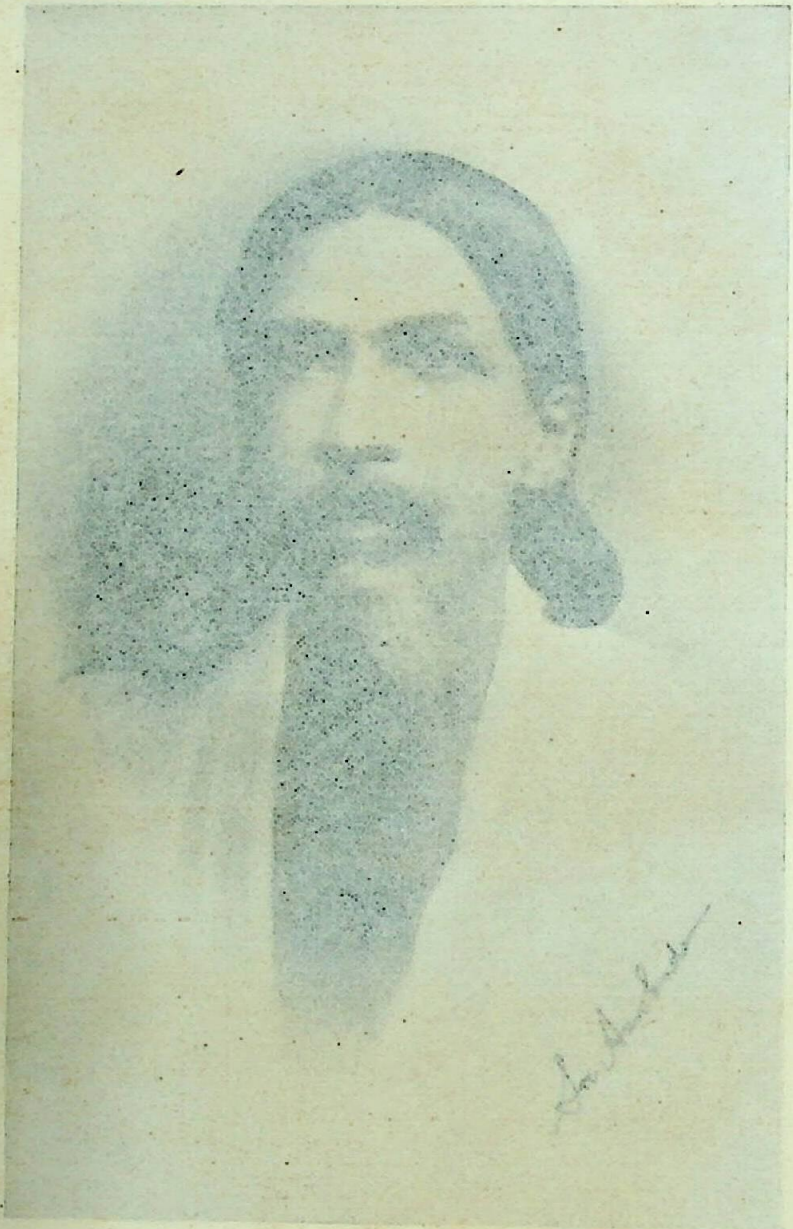

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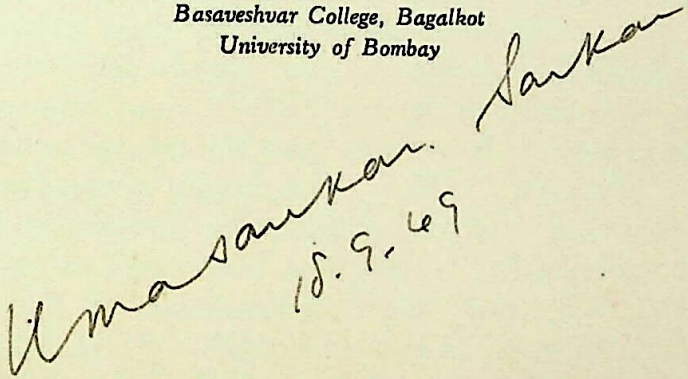

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PREFACE

In the following pages I have made a conscientious attempt to present a composite portrait of Sri Aurobindo. The biographer of Sri Aurobindo has to be himself a poet and a prophet, a philosopher and a Yogi; and since I am none of these, the task I had undertaken has greatly exceeded my abilities. I nevertheless hope that this study, being the first attempt of its kind in English, will supply the need for an easy and reliable introduction to Sri Aurobindo's life and works.

The first draft of this book was completed in February 1942; *it was taken up again, rewritten and enlarged, and put into its present shape in October-November* 1943. *I have incorporated into the book some paragraphs and stray sentences from three of my other published papers,* viz., "*The 'Personality' of Sri Aurobindo*" (The Social Welfare, *July* 1943), "*Sri Aurobindo as a Literary Artist*" (Sri Aurobindo Mandir Second Annual, *August* 1943), *and* "*The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo*" (The New Review, *October* 1943). *For the rest, I have generally indicated in the footnotes the extent of my indebtedness to others in writing this book.*

To many of my friends in Sri Aurobindo Asram and outside, who have favoured me with much helpful criticism and advice, I owe an immense load of gratitude; but as they object, with a rare self-effacement, to

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my mentioning them here by name, I have reluctantly to satisfy myself with this collective acknowledgement.

Lastly, I am very grateful to the Director of the Government Central Press, Hyderabad (Deccan), and the Manager of the Arya Publishing House, Calcutta, for the extreme care and faultless taste with which they have carried out the printing and publication of this book in even these very difficult days.

K. R. SRINIVASA IYENGAR.

Bagalkot,
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INTRODUCTION

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periodic formations of foam and ripples on the irregular surface. How, then, was the miracle—for miracle surely it was—of such abundant vitality preserved over so enormous a stretch of time? How did such vitality manage ever to tame the upsurging forces of disintegration into submission or to force out of even them new syntheses, new harmonies, new achievements? The answer stares us in the face if we correctly read the story of the rise and fulfilment of ancient Hindu civilization:

> "On the one side there is an insatiable curiosity, the desire of life to know itself in every detail, on the other a spirit of organization and scrupulous order, the desire of the mind to tread through life with a harmonized knowledge and in the right rhythm and measure. Thus an ingrained and dominant spirituality, an inexhaustible vital creativeness and gust of life and, mediating between them, a powerful, penetrating and scrupulous intelligence combined of the rational, ethical, and æsthetic mind each at a high intensity of action, created the harmony of ancient Indian culture."[1]

At long last, the vitality showed signs of certain emasculation, the spiritual force behind it seemed to retire further and further into the far interior, and the intelligence seemed to be somewhat dazed by the shock of new phenomena, and so—with a fatal

1. Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India*, p. 18.

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rapidity—the disintegrating forces grew dominant more and more, the blood-streams of culture ceased to flow with zest (or flow at all), and Bharatavarsha became anæmic and wasted and bleak and forlorn. It looked as though the twin movements, Vaishnavite and Saivite, for the revival of Hinduism had also lost their great spiritual drive and only a memory of god-intoxicated singers like Kabir and Tulsi Das and Chaitanya lay behind to keep the obscured embers of Indian spirituality yet alive. " Any other nation under the same pressure would have long ago perished soul and body. But certainly the outward members were becoming gangrened; the powers of renovation seemed for a moment to be beaten by the powers of stagnation, and stagnation is death."[1]

And yet,—was it really possible? How indeed had a change so disastrous really come to pass? Having reached up to the peaks of divine endeavour in the Vedic and Upanishadic ages, and in the ages of Valmiki, Vyasa and Kalidasa, how had the curve of Indian civilization been deflected from its ascending path, how had its progress been strained lower and lower, even to touch the rugged levels and forbidding sterility of the " waste land "?

Obviously, then, the change had been brought about in different stages,—at any rate owing to the operation of a number of adverse circumstances. There was, firstly, the failure of the fount of vital

1. Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India*, p. 18.

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energy consequent on the studied " denial of the ascetic," his systematic refusal to look at the world and its million-petalled munificence of colour and sound and taste and smell. There was, secondly, a failure of the fount of intellectual energy, " a slumber of the scientific and the critical mind as well as the critical intuition"[1]; dialectical reasoning now acquired an oppressive vogue and mere sectarianism assumed the garb of omniscience and sat on the high judgement seat and doled out but thin and fitful currents of intellectual energy to the " hungry sheep " that looked up for guidance and spiritual food. Above all, spirituality was no more an all-embracing phenomenon, giving strength and significance to every minor and major department of life and conduct, but a thing—a force—whose existence was admitted indeed as a matter of safe policy, but whose influence was reduced to a bare minimum. Thus, while spirituality remained a factor in the life of the Hindu, it only remained in the dim background, burning " no longer with the large and clear flame of knowledge of former times, but in intense jets and in a dispersed action which replaces the old magnificent synthesis and in which certain spiritual truths are emphasized to the neglect of others. This diminution amounts to a certain failure of the great endeavour which is the whole meaning of Indian culture, a falling short in the progress towards the perfect spiritualization of the mind and the life."[2]

1 & 2. Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India*, pp. 28, 29.

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These, then, were the causes of the decline and fall—albeit a temporary one—of the Indian civilization : the will to live was lacking, the intellect had grown moribund, and spirituality would not assert itself and revitalize the rest but was unaccountably quiescent or was only half-heartedly active. The impact of the West, and the subsequent national confusions and disasters, quickened the process of decay and disintegration, and the stream of Indian culture was in very truth lost—as if for ever—amidst the brambles or quicksands of the eighteenth century. The wheel had come full circle ; the ebb tide had done its very worst ; and the prospect was gloomy and unutterably sad :

> Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
> Waited for rain, while the black clouds
> Gathered far distant, over Himavant.
> The jungle crouched, humped in silence.[1]

II

But evening and night are—they must be according to the Indian law of cyclical recurrence—ever a sure prelude, however unpleasant, to the dew-filled and life-giving dawn of a bright and new future. No wonder men could discover the dim streaks of the new dawn even in the hour of India's darkest

1. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 395-398.

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extremity ; they *would* ask from time to time, at once incredulous and full of hope :

> Was I deceived, or did a sable cloud
> Turn forth her silver lining on the night ?[1]

The evil spell broke at last. It had been, after all, a " waste land " only in appearance ; it had been, on the other hand, rather the seed-time of renascent India. Even the European impact was to prove somewhat of a blessing in disguise, for it gave to decadent Hinduism and to India generally " three needed impulses. It revived the dormant intellectual and critical impulse ; it rehabilitated life and awakened the desire of new creation ; it put the reviving Indian spirit face to face with novel conditions and ideals and the urgent necessity of understanding, assimilating and conquering them."[2]

Naturally enough, new times threw up new men to inspire and to lead. To a certain extent, sympathetic and understanding Europeans like Sir William Jones and Henry Colebrooke and Horace Hayman Wilson had paved the way for a revival, but they were foreigners after all, and a nation's salvation has always to be worked for and achieved by her own sons and daughters. That is why we have to mark the real turning of the tide with the occurrence of Raja Rammohan Roy on the Indian scene. Rammohan was truly an Olympian figure and he

1. Milton, *Comus*, ll. 221-2.
2. Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India*, p. 31.

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inaugurated "a new revival in culture, in social reform and in religious awakening.... He was essentially a builder. He came to fulfil and not to destroy."[1] He was all for abolishing foolish and baneful customs like *sati*, he was for getting back to the original purity of Hinduism, he was an enthusiastic advocate of the "new learning" through the medium of English; he was, in short, a man with his eyes unfalteringly turned, not towards the Past, but towards the Future. And yet, in Dr. Wingfield-Stratford's words, Rammohan "was no mere Deist or unbeliever, but a loyal Hindu, a Brahman of the Brahmans, steeped in the lore of the Upanishads and making his life's work the restoration of the Hindu faith to its pristine simplicity."[2]

A Colossus though Rammohan was, he too had his collaborators, and he was blessed in his successors who, in their own several ways, carried on his noble work of galvanizing the Hindu fold. We have had accordingly, during the past one hundred years or so, Titanic figures like a Dwarkanath Tagore, a Dayanand Saraswati, a Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, a Swami Vivekananda, a Mahadeo Govind Ranade, a Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a Rabindranath Tagore. In their divers unique ways, they have all given Indian culture a fresh lease of life and they have all asserted the claims of the

1. Mahendranath Sircar, *Eastern Lights*, p. 183.
2. *The History of British Civilization*, p. 964.

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Soul of India to live its untrammelled life, in the spiritual no less than in the other different spheres of human activity. From these great men—as from others like Sri Ramana Maharshi and Sri Aurobindo, who are happily with us still—we have learned that, if only we do not prove false to our heritage, we can indeed rewrite our ancient glories in letters of gold. As Sri Aurobindo remarked about thirty-five years ago, "ours is the eternal land, the eternal people, the eternal religion, whose strength, greatness, holiness may be overclouded but never, even for a moment, utterly cease. The hero, the Rishi, the saint, are the natural fruits of our Indian soil; and there has been no age in which they have not been born."[1]

III

Among the Rishis of our own day, Sri Aurobindo's name must take a place at the top. His personality looms so immense on spiritual India's horizon that he is rather like the great Dayananda that he has described in these winged and inspiring words:

"It is as if one were to walk for a long time amid a range of hills rising to a greater or lesser altitude, but all with sweeping contours, green-clad, flattering the eye even in their most bold and striking elevation. But amidst them all, one hill

1. *Bankim-Tilak-Dayananda*, p. 7.

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stands apart, piled up in sheer strength, a mass of bare and puissant granite, with verdure on its summit, a solitary pine jutting out into the blue, a great cascade of pure, vigorous and fertilizing water gushing out from its strength as a very fountain of life and health to the valley."[1]

Such is indeed the impression created on our minds by the spiritual phenomenon that Sri Aurobindo is, —excepting that in this particular case the "sweeping contours" too are not lacking but are surprisingly grafted on the lone, sky-labouring hill.

The wise men of the East and the West have already paid their homage to Rishi Aurobindo. Fifteen years ago, Rabindranath Tagore wrote thus of Sri Aurobindo :

"At the very first sight I could realize that he had been seeking for the soul and had gained it, and through this long process of realization had accumulated within him a silent power of inspiration. His face was radiant with an inner light and his serene presence made it evident to me that his soul was not crippled and cramped to the measure of some tyrannical doctrine, which takes delight in inflicting wounds upon life.

I felt that the utterance of the ancient Hindu Rishi spoke from him of that equanimity which gives the human soul its freedom of entrance into the All. I said to him, 'You have the Word and

1. *Bankim-Tilak-Dayananda*, p. 46.

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we are waiting to accept it from you. India will speak through your voice to the world, *Hearken to me.*' . . . . . .

Years ago I saw Aurobindo in the atmosphere of his earlier heroic youth and I sang to him, 'Aurobindo, accept the salutations from Rabindranath.' To-day I saw him in a deeper atmosphere of reticent richness of wisdom and again sang to him in silence, 'Aurobindo, accept the salutations from Rabindranath.' "

And the late Romain Rolland, in his *India on the March*, described Sri Aurobindo as " the completest synthesis that has been realized to this day of the genius of Asia and the genius of Europe "; and he remarked further that Sri Aurobindo " the last of the great Rishis holds in his hand, in firm unrelaxed grip, the bow of creative energy." Not only is Sri Aurobindo one of the leading thinkers of the day, one who, in his *magnum opus, The Life Divine*, has given us " the greatest book which has been produced " in our time[1]; not only is he one of the great sons of modern India, " perhaps the most accomplished " of present-day Indian thinkers,[2] and a great patriot and a great Yogi; not only is he a great humanist, a profound student and critic of classical and modern literatures, both Indian and European;

1. Sir Francis Younghusband (in the course of a letter to Dilip).
2. S. Radhakrishnan (in his Foreword to A. C. Das's *Sri Aurobindo and the Future of Mankind*).

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but Sri Aurobindo is also the most versatile, the most brilliant, and the most astonishingly successful of the Indian writers of English verse and one of the supreme masters of English prose. His many-faceted personality, as it casts its lambent flame on his poems and his letters and his luminous essays and his massive treatises, attracts us, fascinates us, at times even awes us. Let us nevertheless now venture to draw closer, if possible, to Sri Aurobindo, and study diligently and reverently the evolution and constitution of his unique personality.

IV

It must be remembered, however, that the task is by no means easy. Sri Aurobindo himself once wrote to his disciple, Dilip Kumar Roy: "No one can write about my life, because it has not been on the surface for man to see."[1] What do we know of Valmiki, for instance? Only this—and what more do we want?—that he was the kind of man (or superman) who could have written (because he did in fact write) the immortal *Ramayana*. Likewise, Sri Aurobindo is the kind of man (or superman) who is able to live the life he has lived and is living, and to write the many books that he has in fact written;

1. From Dilip's typescript English version of his own Bengali sketch included in his *Tirthankar*. I am indebted to Dilip, as also to our common friend Shankargauda Patil (who introduced me to Dilip and his works), for varied help in the preparation of this book.

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he is the kind of man who has lived wisely enough, intensely and richly enough, and, above all, lived sufficiently in the light of Truth, to be able to write his many beautiful poems and his innumerable letters and his great prose treatises. Few amongst us of the younger generation have had the experience of seeing him in person. We can but gaze at his published photographs (much as we look at the supposed portraits of Homer or of Sophocles or of Shakespeare) and make whatever fanciful or wild conjectures may seem valid or appropriate!

There are, however, the fortunate few who are privileged to have *darshan* of Sri Aurobindo, off and on, in the Yogasram at Pondicherry; they are vouchsafed on those rare occasions a vision of the Purusha in all his majesty and spirituality, and they do see then something of the unique Person, feel the stern glare of his Power, and even contact the very waves of his Personality; and certainly their testimony is very valuable. We have quoted Rabindranath Tagore already; and here is a pen-portrait by Dilip Kumar Roy:

> "'A radiant personality!'—sang the air itself about him. A deep aura of peace ringed him round, an ineffable yet concrete peace which drew you into its orbit. But it was the eyes which fascinated me most—shining like two beacons in life's grey waste of waters. His torso was bare except for a scarf thrown across.....he smiled kindly, his deep glance spraying peace upon me

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somehow, giving me a feeling of his compassion.. not a mere human compassion but something far greater !"[1]

This was the Sri Aurobindo of 1924: the young neophyte was deeply stirred, he had indeed found his guru—the guru of gurus—at last!

But even Dilip finds himself powerless to gauge adequately Sri Aurobindo's "inner life." The many things that, in a strictly material sense, have happened to Sri Aurobindo are certainly *not* his life—and yet these are the only things that we can clutch at and eagerly, greedily, nay adoringly, scrutinize! If we cannot see the secret processes of Sri Aurobindo's life, the harmony underlying and triumphing over, including and exceeding, its infinite fluctuations,—let us at least, since it is all that is left to us, notice the outward accretions, the so-called "facts and dates" of his terrestrial life!

1. *Tirthankar.* Dilip's account of his more recent interview with Sri Aurobindo is also very illuminating. The interview took place on February 4, 1943, but the account of the interview remains so far unpublished.

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PART I

HUMANIST AND POET

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CHAPTER TWO

CHILDHOOD, BOYHOOD AND YOUTH

I[1]

The district of Hoogly in West Bengal—the district that has given to Bengal and to India two such world-famous figures as Rammohan and Ramakrishna—can almost be called the cradle of the Indian renaissance. Konnagar is a thickly populated area, almost a small town, in the Hoogly district; situated on the west bank of the river Hoogly (otherwise known as Bhagirathi), it is about eleven miles to the north of Calcutta. Konnagar is apparently a place of considerable antiquity, for it is mentioned in old Bengali literature. The Mitras and the Ghoses of Konnagar have carved out creditable names for themselves in the political and cultural history of Bengal. Among the many outstanding men who have sprung up from the fertile soil of Konnagar, special mention may be made of Sib Chandra Deb, a leader of the Brahmo Samaj movement and one of the greatest philanthropists that ever Bengal has produced and, besides, one whose munificence gave Konnagar

1. I am indebted to Sri Sisirkumar Mitra of Sri Aurobindo Asram who kindly conveyed to me, through my friend Shankargauda Patil, much of the information contained in this section.

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most of its public institutions; Dr. Trailokyanath Mitra and Raja Digambar Mitra, once well-known figures in Bengal's political life; Raja Dr. Rajendralal Mitra, the famous antiquarian; and Mahamahopadhyaya Dinabandhu Nyayaratna, the eminent Sanskrit scholar.

In the reputed Ghose family of Konnagar, Krishnadhan Ghose was born about 1840, his parents being Kaliprasad Ghose, a man of status and substance, and Srimati Kailasabasini Devi, a lady widely known for her remarkable beauty, her feeling for religion and her exceptional piety. Young Krishnadhan had a meritorious school and college career; he passed the Entrance Examination of the Calcutta University from the local school in the year 1858 and then proceeded to the Calcutta Medical College. When he was in his fourth year at the Medical College, he married Srimati Swarnalata Devi, the eldest daughter of Rishi Rajnarayan Bose. It was an alliance of two authentic and forceful currents in the inner life of Bengal. A student of Henry Derozio and David Hare, Rajnarayan Bose was an early synthesis of the East and the West, and in the heyday of his hallowed life "represented the high water-mark of the composite culture of the country—Vedantic, Islamic and European."[1] He was a leader of the Brahmo Samaj

1. The quotation is taken from an article on the life of Sri Aurobindo, extracted from *Svaraj* and published in *The Karmayogin* in the 7th and succeeding issues of that paper.

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in its palmiest days, he was one of the makers of modern Bengal, and he is not inaptly described as the "grandfather of Indian nationalism"; but at the same time, the fire of spirituality burned steadily within him and his ardent love for India revealed itself in many acts of adoration and benevolence. On the occasion of his death in 1899, his grandson (Sri Aurobindo) wrote a touching sonnet entitled *Transit, non Periit :*

> Not in annihilation lost, nor given
> To darkness art thou fled from us and light,
> O strong and sentient spirit ; no mere heaven
> Of ancient joys, no silence eremite
> Received thee ; but the omnipresent Thought
> Of which thou wast a part and earthly hour,
> Took back its gift. Into that splendour caught
> Thou hast not lost thy special brightness. Power
> Remains with thee and the old genial force
> Unseen for blinding light, not darkly lurks....[1]

When Krishnadhan Ghose left Calcutta for England to undergo a course of advanced medical studies, it was his father-in-law's earnest wish that the young sojourner in the West will not allow himself to be dazed and denationalized by the civilization of the Occident. Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose returned to India in due course with an M. D. from the Aberdeen University, full of honours and bristling with plans for the future ; he was now a

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 34.

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confirmed believer in Western civilization, he turned his back on things Indian, he wished India could transform herself overnight into another self-confident and puissant England; but although he was, as a result of his English trip, perilously poised on the bleak slopes of agnosticism, his innate humanity was as potent as ever, he sensed the ills of maimed and ailing humanity, and he early decided to dedicate himself to the unstinted service of the people. His was a noble and lovable countenance, and once a Christian missionary exclaimed to Rajnarayan: "I have never seen such a sweet face as his!" In the course of a few years, Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose came to be acclaimed as one of the most successful civil surgeons of his day.

On his return from England, the orthodox sections of Konnagar wanted Dr. Krishnadhan—as was the custom in those days and till recently—to go through the ceremony of *prayaschitta* or purification for having voyaged beyond the seas. Dr. Krishnadhan refused to go through the ceremony and preferred rather to leave his village for good. He sold away—"for a song" as it were—his house and his property to a local Brahmin in accordance with his plighted word, turning down the more tempting offer made by one of his own relations. Anyhow he left the place of his birth and moved from district to district as the Government Civil Surgeon, rendering as a mere matter of course true succour to countless numbers of distressed people.

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In Bhagalpur, Rungpur and Khulna, and especially in the last place, Dr. Krishnadhan's name became almost a household word. Individuals and institutions alike benefited by their fruitful association with Dr. Krishnadhan, whose uncalculating and generous nature ever gave away without let or hindrance. " Keen of intellect, tender of heart, impulsive and generous almost to recklessness, regardless of his own wants, but sensitive to the sufferings of others —this was the inventory of the character of Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose."[1]

Not only was Dr. Krishnadhan a capable Civil Surgeon and a true friend of the people, but he was also alertly responsive to the literary and social cross-currents of his day. He took keen interest in the social welfare of the people and he evinced—despite the fact that he was " essentially a product of English education and European culture "[2]—great enthusiasm for the works of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Being a *persona grata* with European as well as Bengalee society, Dr. Krishnadhan was able to act as a link, a bridge, between the two ; and, indeed, he was called the " Suez Canal," for his house served as a common meeting place, day after day, for both Europeans and Bengalees. During the greater part of his active life, Dr. Krishnadhan was also blessed with the companionship of his charming wife, Srimati Swarnalata Devi, who was in

1. & 2. *The Karmayogin*, No. 7.

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fact known as the " Rose of Rungpur " during their stay in that district town. It was only towards the close of her life that she fell a victim to an unfortunate malady.

II

Aurobindo Ghose was born at about 5 A.M. in Calcutta on the 15th August, 1872, the third son of Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose and Srimati Swarnalata Devi,—*non sine dis animosus infans* (a brave babe, surely, and some god's special care) !:

Aurobindo's father, Dr. Krishnadhan,—true to his own deep convictions and in conformity with the practice of many other educated Indians of his time who had capitulated to the glamour of the West—wished to give his children a wholly European type of education. He therefore sent Aurobindo, along with his brothers Benoybhushan and Manmohan, to the Loretto Convent School at Darjeeling. Aurobindo was then only five years old !

We know little about Aurobindo's school life, but it appears his teachers in Darjeeling were profoundly impressed by his sparkling and wide-awake intelligence and the singular sweetness of his nature. The companions of the Ghose brothers in the school and in the boarding-house were all English children and, of course, English was the sole medium of instruction in school and the channel of communication outside. A sort of exile in his own

1. Horace, *Odes*, III, 4, l. 20.

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country, Aurobindo thus started lisping in English at the age of five : " in the shadow of the Himalayas, in sight of the wonderful snow-capped peaks, even in their native land they were brought up in alien surroundings."[1]

Aurobindo—we may presume—passed the brief Darjeeling period of his life somewhat like a " careless beam "; his ' psyche ' must nevertheless have stored rich and lasting impressions of this period, because passages like the following seem to be born of intense and personal experience :

He journeyed to the cold north and the hills
Austere, past Budricayshwur ever north,
Till, in the sixth month of his pilgrimage
Uneasy, to a silent place he came
Within a heaped enormous region piled
With prone far-drifting hills, huge peaks overwhelmed
Under the vast illimitable snows,—
Snow on ravine, and snow on cliff, and snow
Sweeping in strenuous outlines to heaven,
With distant gleaming vales and turbulent rocks,
Giant precipices black-hewn and bold
Daring the universal whiteness ; last,
A mystic gorge into some secret world.
He in that region waste and wonderful
Sojourned, and morning-star and evening-star
Shone over him and faded, and immense
Darkness wrapped the hushed mountain solitudes
And moonlight's brilliant muse and the cold stars
And day upon the summits brightening.[2]

1. Lokita Basu, *Indian Writers of English Verse*, p. 101.
2. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, pp. 54-5.

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Is it Pururavas or Aurobindo that thus stands charmed and enraptured, gazing at the "immortal summits?" Probably, it is both!

III

In 1879, Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose and his wife took Aurobindo and his brothers, Benoybhushan and Manmohan, to England. The children were entrusted to an English family, the Drewetts, in Manchester; it was expected that, under the fostering care of the Drewetts, the children would grow up into typical products of Western culture, uncontaminated by Oriental ways and ideas. It was during this visit that Srimati Swarnalata Devi gave birth to Barindra Kumar Ghose in England.

While Aurobindo's two brothers were sent to the Manchester Grammar School, Aurobindo himself was educated privately by Mr. and Mrs. Drewett. Drewett was an accomplished Latin scholar; he did not teach Aurobindo Greek, but grounded him well in Latin. It appears Aurobindo also played cricket in Mr. Drewett's garden, though not at all well! Presently the Drewetts had to leave Manchester for Australia, and hence Aurobindo was sent to St. Paul's School, London, in 1885. The Head Master of St. Paul's, impressed by Aurobindo's character and abilities, took him up to ground him in Greek, and then pushed him rapidly into the higher classes of the school.

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Five years more passed; young Aurobindo had acquired a very considerable proficiency in the classics and he was therefore enabled to proceed to King's College, Cambridge, with a Senior Classical Scholarship of the value of £80 per year. Mr. Oscar Browning, then a well-known figure at Cambridge, immediately recognized Aurobindo's unusual talents.

Aurobindo had given his whole-hearted attention to the classics at Manchester and at St. Paul's; but even at St. Paul's, in the last three years he simply went through his prescribed school course and spent most of his spare time in general reading, giving particular attention to English poetry, literature and fiction, French literature, and the history of ancient, mediæval and modern Europe. He spent much time too in writing poetry. As for the prescribed courses of studies, they engaged but little of his time; he was already at ease in them, and did not therefore think it necessary or profitable to labour over them any longer. All the same, he was able to win all the prizes in King's College in one year for Greek and Latin verse, etc.

In 1890, Aurobindo appeared for the Indian Civil Service examination and passed it with credit, scoring record marks in Greek and Latin. At the end of the period of probation, however, he avoided appearing for the departmental Riding examination. He felt no call for the I.C.S. and wished to escape from that bondage. By certain manœuvres he

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managed to get himself disqualified for Riding without himself rejecting the service, which he knew his family would not have allowed him to do.

In the meantime, Sri Aurobindo was pursuing his studies in many directions. He spent some time also over learning Italian, some German and a little Spanish. In due course, he passed the First Part of the Classical Tripos examination in the first class. It is on passing this First Part that the degree of B.A. is usually given; but as he had only two years at his disposal, he had to pass it in his second year at Cambridge. But as the First Part gives the degree only if it is taken in the third year, Aurobindo, since he had taken the degree in the second year, would have had to appear for the Second Part of the Tripos in the fourth year to qualify for the degree. He might even so have got the degree if he had made an application for it, but he did not care to do so. He did not presumably think a degree as such valuable, since he had then no intention of taking up a purely academic career.

It must be added here that during this period Dr. Krishnadhan's remittances to his sons tended to be both irregular and inadequate; necessarily, therefore, Aurobindo, along with Benoybhushan and Manmohan, was often in straitened circumstances. He experienced in a real measure "hardships" and even "starvation"[1]; but he managed

1. Sri Aurobindo's Letter to Dilip (1935).

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safely to pull through somehow with the help of his scholarship and the practice of economy.

Aurobindo was barely twenty years old, but he had even at that early and tender age achieved rare academic distinctions. He had mastered Greek and Latin, English and French ; and he had also acquired sufficient familiarity with other continental languages like German and Italian. In short, he had won the master-key that was to unlock the sumless treasuries of Western culture. Aurobindo was young and earnest and not seldom taciturn and meditative ; he was a learned young man, he was possessed of a subtle intelligence and a receptive memory. He was sensitive to beauty in man and Nature, he responded to the authentic with his whole soul, he watched with abhorrence the thousand and one instances of man's cruelty to man ; indeed, he had felt even from early childhood a strong hatred and disgust for all kinds of cruelty and oppression, and as he grew older the feeling but progressively deepened and grew more and more poignant. For fourteen years he had lived in England, divorced from the culture of his forefathers ; he had developed " foreign tastes and tendencies " and he had been " denationalized " like his own country itself.[1] But he was destined to change all that and to re-nationalize himself !

In the meantime, Aurobindo was in search of a

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, pp. 58-9.

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suitable job. He obtained, with the help of James Cotton, Sir Henry Cotton's brother, an introduction to H.H. the late Sayaji Rao, Gaekwar of Baroda, during his visit to England; the interview was a success, and Aurobindo secured a promising appointment in the Baroda State Service. He accordingly left England for India in February 1893.

IV

Aurobindo, like his brother Manmohan,—they were, indeed, in the Horatian phrase, *par nobile fratrum*, a noble pair of brothers—had started writing English verse even during his stay in England. Some of the poems written by Aurobindo between his eighteenth and twentieth years were published in book form soon after his return to India. We shall glance at some of these poems before we follow him to Baroda.

A poet's first essays in verse are akin to promissory notes; they have some value, no doubt, by themselves—the "face value" as we call it; but the main thing is that they give the reader alluring hopes of the future when he could redeem the notes at last and line his long purse with hard cash in shining silver and gold.

Aurobindo's early adventures in English verse were the promissory notes of a millionaire confident of his credit. Thus his "juvenile" poems snap Aurobindo in various emotional and intellectual attitudes and show also his growing mastery of verse

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technique ; the poems, taken as a whole, constitute a fine record of the education and ideas and imaginations and feelings created by a purely European culture. No doubt the derivative element is prominent in much of Aurobindo's early verse. The names and lineaments and allusions cannot but appear rather exotic to an Indian reader ; but, then, knowing as he did at the time hardly anything about India and her culture, Aurobindo could not have done otherwise. Besides, the literary echoes are many, and are drawn from varied sources ; the result, however, is invariably very good verse and not seldom true poetry.

Songs to Myrtilla[1] opens with an interesting colloquy between Glaucus and Æthon, who extol the felicities of night and day respectively. When Æthon sings :

> But day is sweeter ; morning bright
> Has put the stars out ere the light,[2]

we are inevitably reminded of the opening stanza of Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam*. But these echoes do not matter ; at times they even enhance the fascination of the fabric of the verse. Aurobindo is young and enthusiastic ; he cannot choose but see and hear ; he cannot choose but catch, like the shower in the sunshine, dazzling rainbow hues and present

1. *Songs to Myrtilla*, containing for the most part Aurobindo's juvenile work, was printed in 1895 at Baroda for private circulation only.
2. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 1.

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them for our edification. These early poems of Aurobindo's are thus very sensuous and impassioned, and one often lights upon evocations of sound and colour as in the following passages :

> Behold in emerald fire
> The spotted lizard crawl
> Upon the sun-kissed wall
> And coil in tangled brake
> The green and sliding snake
> Under the red-rose briar....[1]
>
> His rose-lit cheeks, his eyes' pale bloom
> Were sorrow's anteroom ;
> His wings did cause melodious moan ;
> His mouth was like a rose o'erblown ;
> The cypress-garland of renown
> Did make his shadowy crown.....[2]
>
> And I have ever known him wild
> And merry as a child,
> As roses red, as roses sweet,
> The west wind in his feet,
> Tulip-girdled, kind and bold,
> With heart's-ease in his curls of gold....[3]

Oh yes—oh dear yes—the lines glide along easily, very easily, the very conceits are pretty and convincing, and we are not, after all, so very much put out by the company of the Florimels and Cymotheas and Myrtillas and Dryads who seem to people this strange and far country.

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, pp. 3-4.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 5.
3. *Ibid.*, I, p. 6.

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This is what has apparently happened : a super-sensibility for Greek and a true feeling for English sound values have enabled the youthful Aurobindo to invoke the blushful Hippocrene herself with striking success. What can be more sensuously Keatsian than *Night by the Sea*, that tantalizing poem of beauty and mystery and love's languor and romance :

> Love, a moment drop thy hands ;
> Night within my soul expands.
> Veil thy beauties milk-rose-fair
> In that dark and showering hair.
> Coral kisses ravish not
> When the soul is tinged with thought....[1]
>
> All the lights of spring are ended,
> To the wintry haven wended.
> Beauty's boons and nectarous leisure,
> Lips, the honeycombs of pleasure,
> Cheeks enrosed, Love's natal soil,
> Breasts, the ardent conqueror's spoil,
> Spring rejects ; a lovelier child
> His brittle fancies has beguiled.....[2]

And so on....the trochaic measure and the clinching couplets assault the reader with their sheer momentum ; and we hear too, not only of Edith and of " soft narcissi's golden camp," but also of " the widening East " and of the " rose of Indian grain."

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 18.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 19.

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The same metrical proficiency can also be marked in poems like *The Lover's Complaint* and *Love in Sorrow;* neither the burden of classical allusion in the former nor the accents of romantic frustration that punctuate the latter should blind us to the reality of poignant grief that sustains the two pieces as moving utterances in verse. Occasionally the reader is intrigued: what, for instance, is the significance of these six lines:

> For there was none who loved me, no, not one.
> Alas, what was there that a man should love?
> For I was misery's last and frailest son
> And even my mother bade me homeless rove.
> And I had wronged my youth and nobler powers
> By weak attempts, small failures, wasted hours.[1]

Whose "glorious beauty stained with gold" the poet will behold no more? Who is "mother Arethuse" to whom he bids this sad farewell? It is perilous—and generally futile—to turn from poetry to poetolatry. The poems are, perhaps, just poems, temperamental effusions in terms of impassioned verse; or —who knows?—Aurobindo was indirectly giving expression to his personal emotions on the eve of his departure from England.

This was how, perhaps, it all happened. Aurobindo looked back at the past fourteen years—years of study and aspiration, of loneliness and partial fulfilment. During this period he had developed an attachment to English and European thought and

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, pp. 24-5.

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literature, though not to England as a country; although his brother, Manmohan, had for a time actually looked upon England as his adopted country, Aurobindo never did so; and it was France—not England—that intellectually and emotionally fascinated Aurobindo, notwithstanding the fact that he had neither lived in it nor seen it. Thus the thought of leaving England induced no real regrets in Aurobindo. He had developed no sentimental attachment to the immediate past—the stay of fourteen years in England—and he had no misgivings about the future either. He had made few friendships in England, and none very intimate; he had, as a matter of fact, never found the mental atmosphere in England congenial to his own unique predilections and aspirations. Anyhow, he was leaving England,—but why had he ever been sent away by his Mother—"Mother of might, Mother free"—to that far country? Aurobindo felt the flutter of unutterable thoughts, and, in any case, the by-product was poetry!

V

Aurobindo had other things also to occupy his thoughts,—politics, for instance, and the glamorous careers of poets and politicians. His *Hic Jacet* (Glasnevin Cemetery) and *Charles Stewart Parnell* 1891 are both vigorous expressions of Aurobindo's political sensibility. Their clarity and strength make the poems immediately effective.

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Like Macaulay's *A Jacobite's Epitaph*, Aurobindo's *Hic Jacet* also achieves its severe beauty through sheer economy of words; Aurobindo's theme, the very rhythm and language of the poem, all carry one's mind back to Macaulay's poem; and Jacobean or Irish patriot, the end is the same: "Behold your guerdon"—"a broken heart!" The influence of Macaulay's poem on Aurobindo must, however, have been unconscious, for he seems never to have read *The Lays of Ancient Rome* after early childhood; *A Jacobite's Epitaph*, in particular, had made little impression on Aurobindo and he had not probably read it even twice. All the same, the two poems deserve to be studied together.

The six lines on Parnell, again, are very vividly phrased, and the fifth line is truly memorable:

> Thou too wert then a child of tragic earth![1]

Aurobindo's growing control over the subtle mechanism of poetic utterance is exemplified also in the force, the wisdom and the metallic finish of this portrait of Goethe:

> A perfect face amid barbarian faces,
> A perfect voice of sweet and serious rhyme,
> Traveller with calm, inimitable paces,
> Critic with judgment absolute to all time,
> A complete strength when men were maimed and weak.[2]

Admirer of Goethe and Parnell, lover of Greece and Ireland, young Aurobindo wanted to lay the

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 10.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 9.

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deep foundations of his Faith, to plan and work out the details of his future course of Action. We have seen that Aurobindo wrote feelingly about Ireland's fight for freedom; but wasn't he thinking, in fact, of his own country and the things that needed to be done there before she could redeem herself in her own and in the eyes of the world?

Aurobindo's nonage was over; he would be an exile in England no more. He was going back to India, to serve under the Gaekwar of Baroda; he cast one last look at the many-chambered edifice of European culture, European thought and literature, and thus uttered his "Envoi":

For in Sicilian olive-groves no more
Or seldom must my footprints now be seen,
Nor tread Athenian lanes, nor yet explore
Parnassus or thy voiceful shores, O Hippocrene.

Me from her lotus heaven Saraswati
Has called to regions of eternal snow
And Ganges pacing to the southern sea,
Ganges upon whose shores the flowers of Eden blow.[1]

No more could he devote himself to Greek poetry as he had done during the past few years; no more would he exchange alexandrines and hexameters with the faded poets of ancient Greece and Rome; no more would he feel the heart-beats of European culture in all its vivacity and strength. That

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 36.

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chapter was ended; and—"Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new!"

It is significant also that Aurobindo is now talking of the Ganges and of the "regions of eternal snow" rather than of Baroda or its nearest river or mountain-range. Baroda would be a stepping-stone, convenient and welcome enough, but Aurobindo's real work would lie elsewhere; and he seems to have known it—somehow very clearly glimpsed it—from the very outset.

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CHAPTER THREE

BARODA

I

Sri Aurobindo's arrival in India was preceded by his father Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose's death in peculiarly tragic circumstances. Incorrect news of Sri Aurobindo's sailing by a steamer which was wrecked near Lisbon and of his death in the wreck were reported to him. The news came to Dr. Krishnadhan as a stunning blow: he concluded that Aurobindo was lost to him for ever, and even his brave stout heart broke, he had a collapse, and he died at last uttering Aurobindo's name in lamentation. Aurobindo only left England by a much later steamer. In due course his brothers too arrived: Benoybhushan obtained an employment under H.H. the Maharaja of Coochbehar, Manmohan became a Professor of English at the Calcutta Presidency College, and Aurobindo entered the service of H.H. the Maharaja of Baroda. The boys had come home and were now stalwart young men, determined to do well,—but Dr. Krishnadhan's strong heroic soul had already passed away!

Sri Aurobindo was now in Baroda, and he spent the next thirteen years, from 1893 to 1906, in the

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Baroda State Service. He was put first in the Settlement Department, not as an officer, but to learn work; then in the Stamps and Revenue Departments; he was also for some time put to work in the Secretariate for drawing up dispatches, etc. Finally, he oscillated towards the Baroda College and entered it, at first as part-time lecturer in French, afterwards as a regular professor teaching English; and, finally, he became Vice-Principal of the College. Meanwhile, whenever he thought fit, the Maharaja would send for Sri Aurobindo for writing letters, composing speeches or drawing up documents of various kinds which needed special care in the phrasing of the language. At one time, the Maharaja asked Sri Aurobindo to instruct him in English grammar by giving exact and minute rules for each construction, etc. But all this was quite informal, and he was called for the occasion to do miscellaneous things like the writing of an order, or a letter to the British Government, or some other document. Once Sri Aurobindo was specially sent for to Ooty in order to prepare a precis of the whole Bapat case and the judicial opinions on it. He was also for a time at Naini Tal with the Maharaja. He was appointed regular Private Secretary to the Maharaja at the time of the Kashmir tour; but there was much friction between them during the tour, and accordingly the experiment was not repeated. On the whole, Sri Aurobindo was brilliant and quick and efficient in work, though he was not exactly the ideal servant

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for an Indian Maharaja. The Maharaja, on his part, gave Sri Aurobindo a certificate for ability and intelligence, but also for lack of punctuality and regularity. With the Court as such, however, Sri Aurobindo had nothing whatever to do during the whole course of his stay in Baroda.

Sri Aurobindo's most intimate friend at Baroda was Lieutenant Madhavrao Jadhav, who was associated with him in his political ideas and projects and helped him in later years, whenever possible, in his political work. Most of the time he was in Baroda, Sri Aurobindo lived with Madhavrao in his house. During his early years in Baroda, Sri Aurobindo took very little interest in philosophy. He was not attached to metaphysics and found the disputes of dialectical ratiocination too abstract, abstruse and inconclusive. He had read something of Plato as well as Epictetus and the Lucretian statement of the ideas of Epicurus. Only such philosophical ideas as could be made dynamic for life interested him. He had made no study of metaphysics and knew only the general ideas of some European philosophers as any general reader might know them. Of the Indian philosophers also he had read only something of their conclusions. His first acquaintance with Indian spirituality was through the sayings of Ramakrishna and the writings and speeches of Vivekananda. He had an immense admiration for Vivekananda and a much deeper feeling for Ramakrishna. But he did

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not altogether accept Vivekananda's philosophy or stand-point; and though spiritual experiences interested him greatly, and he had some himself, he was not moved towards the practice of Yoga. His experiences began in England, and from the moment he stepped on the shores of India they began to be more frequent. But he did not associate them with Yoga about which at that time he knew nothing. At one time he was asked by his Cambridge friend K. G. Deshpande, who was a sadhak, to take up the practice of Yoga, but he refused to do so because it seemed to him a retreat from life.

To a stray observer, however, it must have appeared then that Sri Aurobindo had settled down to a career of distinguished service in the Baroda State. He had married, too, a charming and beautiful lady, Srimati Mrinalini Devi, and he was thus apparently happy with himself and the world. It appears that he did not care very much to surround himself with the lineaments of pomp and luxury, but lived rather—to use that most hackneyed phrase—a life of "plain living and high thinking." He read incessantly, he pondered over what he had read, and he often spent the livelong hours writing a new poem or concocting one more thoughtful essay redolent of wit and wisdom.

Sri Aurobindo's students at the Baroda College seem to have admired and loved him (of course, *we* know they had no option in the matter!); many of his former pupils—Mr. K. M. Munshi, for instance,

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—have eloquently testified to his tremendous hold on the undergraduates; they seem really to have hung upon his lips in those now remote days, when he lectured to his pupils, whether in the class room or in the debating union. At first, perhaps, Sri Aurobindo could not acclimatize himself to Indian conditions; his lectures were a bit "too stiff" and would not easily go down the throats of the average undergraduates; but very soon Sri Aurobindo took the measure of his wards and made himself both an inspiring professor and a most instructive and illuminating teacher of English.

However, Sri Aurobindo could not help contrasting Indian educational conditions with conditions in London and in Cambridge. The puny stature of the average Indian undergraduate must have sorely pained Sri Aurobindo. How true was it of the Indian scholar, as it was true (in quite another sense) of Dryden's Achitophel:

> A fiery soul, which working out its way,
> Fretted the pigmy body to decay:
> And o'er informed the tenement of clay.[1]

No proper appreciation of the value of physical culture, no sheer joy in the act and art of healthy living; on the contrary, turning spectacled bookworms at a tender age, the Indian scholar was given to excessive intellectual inbreeding; what wonder,

1. *Absalom and Achitophel*, ll. 156-8.

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then, that his general outlook was severely pessimistic in consequence! The Indian scholar ripened fast—all too fast—and "there an end!" What Sri Aurobindo said with reference to the "cultured Bengali" was—and still is—fairly applicable to the average cultured Indian elsewhere also:

> "The cultured Bengali begins life with a physical temperament already delicate and high-strung. He has the literary constitution with its femineity and acute nervousness. Subject this to a cruel strain when it is tenderest and needs the most careful rearing, to the wicked and wantonly cruel strain of instruction through a foreign tongue; put it under the very worst system of training; add enormous academical labour, immense official drudgery in an unhealthy climate and constant mental application...."[1]

Sri Aurobindo pondered over all these engines of our limitation and suffering, he took them to heart, and he was profoundly dissatisfied with the dismal state of affairs in his beloved country.

II

Soon after his arrival in Baroda, Sri Aurobindo, having already taken stock of the political situation in the country, started contributing anonymously, at the instance of Mr. K. G. Deshpande, who was

1. *Indu Prakash*, Article on Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, July 1894.

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then the editor of the *Indu Prakash*, a series of outspoken articles under the challenging general caption, "New Lamps for Old." The articles revealed at once a young man's intolerance and self-confident assertiveness and a wise man's deep and abiding wisdom. Sri Aurobindo began the series with the well-known, yet none-the-less startling, question: "If the blind lead the blind, shall they not both fall into a ditch?"[1] It was about nine years since the Indian National Congress had commenced its activities with a blazing fanfare of trumpets and deafening bugle-sounds,—but where was the Promised Land?

> "The walls of the Anglo-Indian Jericho stand yet without a breach, and the dark spectacle of Penury draws her robe over the land in greater volume and with an ampler sweep."

Sri Aurobindo would have his compatriots realize that "our actual enemy is not any force exterior to ourselves, but our own crying weaknesses, our cowardice, our purblind sentimentalism"; and he had no doubt, therefore, that "our appeal, the appeal of every high-souled and self-respecting nation, ought not to lie to the opinion of the Anglo-Indians, no, nor yet to the British sense of justice, but to our own reviving sense of manhood, to

1. This and the succeeding quotations are extracted from Sri Aurobindo's contributions to *Indu Prakash* from August 7, 1893 to March 6, 1894.

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our own sincere fellow-feeling....with the silent and suffering people of India."

In subsequent articles, Sri Aurobindo tried to show that the Indian National Congress of those days was not a popular body, that the Congress leaders were swearing by false political gods (especially of the British make), and that the Indian patriot had more to learn from the French experiment than from the British :

> "....if we cast our glance across the English channel, we shall witness a very different and more animating spectacle. Gifted with a lighter, subtler, and clearer mind than their insular neighbours, the French people have moved irresistibly towards a social and not a political development."

Sri Aurobindo then showed that if, like the British, we have laid the foundations of social collapse, we have also, like the French, laid the foundations of political incompetence. And Sri Aurobindo concluded by affirming that "our national effort must contract a social and popular tendency before it can hope to be great or fruitful."

The first two articles in the "New Lamps for Old" series made a sensation, and frightened Mahadev Govind Ranade and other Congress leaders. Ranade accordingly warned the proprietor of the *Indu Prakash* that, if the series were continued in the same tone, he would surely be prosecuted for sedition. The original plan of "New Lamps for Old" had thus to be abandoned at the proprietor's

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instance ; the editor, however, requested Sri Aurobindo to continue the series in a modified tone, and he reluctantly consented to do so, but he felt no further interest in the series and the articles were written and published at long intervals and finally dropped of themselves altogether. Sri Aurobindo withdrew into his shell, and decided to exploit a more favourable opportunity for both outlining his views and translating them in terms of practical politics.

Incidentally, these nine political essays and the seven essays in criticism, inspired by the personality and achievement of Bankim Chandra, that followed, are the earliest exhibits that we have of Sri Aurobindo's prose style. Already we notice in them the sinuosity and balance, the imagery and colour, the trenchancy and sarcasm, that were to distinguish Sri Aurobindo's later and maturer writings. He argues with cogency and subtlety ; he describes with picturesqueness and particularity ; and he denounces, if denounce he must, with remorseless and deadly accuracy. This about the " civilians " of about five decades ago :

> " A shallow schoolboy stepping from a cramming establishment to the command of high and difficult affairs can hardly be expected to give us anything magnificent or princely. Still less can it be expected when the sons of small tradesmen are suddenly promoted from the counter to govern great provinces.....Bad in training, void of

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culture, in instruction poor, it (education in England) is in plain truth a sort of education that leaves him with all his imperfections on his head, unmannerly, uncultivated, unintelligent."

As for Mr. Munro (alas, oblivion has all but swallowed him up,—but in his day he seems to have done some injury to Bankim Chandra), he was just a—" badly-educated hyena !" There is no need to multiply quotations : these early prose compositions are indeed as worthy of our scrutiny as are Sri Aurobindo's juvenile poems, because their author—let us not forget it !—was Sri Aurobindo.

III

It is alas only too true that several of the Indians who are (in the expressive phrase) " England returned "—shall we say, returned " with thanks ?" —try absurdly to assume the god, affect a superior nod, and seem to shake the spheres of indigenous life and culture. Sri Aurobindo was different ; a stay of fourteen years in England had enabled him, not only to observe the multifoliate lineaments of European culture, but also to see *through* them and find them wanting. Returning to India, he found to his chagrin that the " educated " classes were still trying to ape the foreigner ; most of them had given their hearts away, " a sordid boon." Our educational machinery, our ruling ideas, our imported models, all were shoddy in appearance and poisonous in their effects. As he wrote some years later :

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"The nineteenth century in India was imitative, self-forgetful, artificial. It aimed at a successful reproduction of Europe in India, forgetting the deep saying of the Gita—'Better the law of one's own being though it be badly done than an alien *dharma* well followed; death in one's own *dharma* is better, it is a dangerous thing to follow the law of another's nature.' For death in one's own *dharma* brings new birth, success in an alien path means only successful suicide."[1]

And yet, miraculously, India did not die a spiritual death; that tragedy, "enacted more than once in history," was somehow averted in the case of India. And the reasons are not far to seek. The Indian countryside had all along remained inveterately Indian; and men like Dayananda, Ramakrishna and Ranade were able, in varying degrees, to stem the tide of denationalization and assert the claims of the Indian genius to live its own life and win its own spiritual laurels even in our materialistic age. Here was the "irrational" phenomenon that saved India! Sri Ramakrishna himself but lived "what many would call the life of a mad man, a man without intellectual training, a man without any outward sign of culture or civilization, a man who lived on the alms of others, such a man as the English educated Indian would

1. *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*, p. 35.

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ordinarily talk of as one useless to society, though not a bane to society. He will say : ' This man is ignorant. What does he know ? What can he teach me who have received from the West all that it can teach ?' But God knew what he was doing. He sent that man to Bengal and set him in the temple of Dakshineshwar in Calcutta, and from North and South, and East and West, the educated men, men who were the pride of the university, who had studied all that Europe can teach, came to fall at the feet of this ascetic. The work of salvation, the work of raising India was begun."[1]

Sri Aurobindo took thus very little time to realize that salvation can come to us, not through dialectical skill and intellectual subtlety, but only through faith and stern spiritual discipline ; not simply by reading Kant and Hegel and their present-day commentators but rather by recapturing, amplifying, and re-living the ancient wisdom of the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita. And yet Sri Aurobindo was never a believer in merely repeating, parrot-like, the many formulæ of the past : he was for re-making them in the mould of the present ! As he once wrote to Dilip : " The traditions of the past are very great in their own place—in the past. But that is no reason why we should go on repeating the past. In the evolution of spiritual consciousness upon earth, a great past

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, pp. 18-9.

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ought to be followed by a greater future."

IV

It was a momentous transition that Sri Aurobindo now decided to bring about. The high walls that had been erected to divide him from his Mother—"Glory of moonlight dreams!"—must now be pulled to pieces, and he should be enabled to *see* her and *hear* her and bow to her in whole-hearted adoration and awe. Ever since his return to India, Sri Aurobindo felt naturally drawn to Indian culture and ways of life, and this temperamental feeling and preference for all that was Indian made it easy for him deliberately to will—and in due course to achieve—the feat of re-nationalization.

Already, while still in England, Sri Aurobindo had learned a little Bengali in connection with the Indian Civil Service examination; and after coming to India, he soon learnt enough by his own efforts to appreciate the novels of Bankim and the poetry of Madhusudan. Sri Aurobindo now went further; he engaged a teacher—a young Bengali litterateur—and started mastering Bengali, while unaided he delved into the treasures of Sanskrit language and literature. He also learned Marathi and Gujarati and, by and by, some other modern Indian languages as well. Presently, he was able to read and appreciate the Sanskrit scriptures, the classical masterpieces of Kalidasa, the epoch-making novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. He was—

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thank God!—restored to his incommensurable heritage, and he would not be induced to lose it again! He was thrilled by the poetry of Madhusudan Dutt and the beautiful and thoughtful creations of Bankim Chandra. Of the former, Sri Aurobindo sang an anthem that is both a melodious dirge and a piece of critical appraisement :

> Poet, who first with skill inspired did teach
> Greatness to our divine Bengali speech,—....
> No human hands such notes ambrosial moved ;
> These accents are not of the imperfect earth ;
> Rather the god was voiceful in their birth,
> The god himself of the enchanting flute,
> The god himself took up thy pen and wrote.[1]

And here are the concluding lines of the poem eulogising Bankim Chandra's services to Bengali letters :

> His nature kingly was and as a god
> In large serenity and light he trod
> His daily way, yet beauty, like soft flowers
> Wreathing a hero's sword, ruled all his hours.
> Thus moving in these iron times and drear,
> Barren of bliss and robbed of golden cheer,
> He sowed the desert with ruddy-hearted rose,
> The sweetest voice that ever spoke in prose.[2]

Sri Aurobindo also wrote a series of seven articles on Bankim Chandra and his works to *Indu Prakash* in 1894.

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, pp. 33-4.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 32.

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Although Sri Aurobindo learned enough even to conduct a weekly in Bengali, writing most of the articles himself, his mastery over the language was not at all the same as over English ; he could make the English language a fit vehicle for the expression of the roll and thunder of politics as also of the peaceful sublime of religious ecstasy,—but he could never address, to his infinite regret, a Bengali audience in their own mother-tongue.[1] That price, at any rate, he had to pay for his long, enforced separation from the Mother.

V

Sri Aurobindo was, indeed, fast re-Indianizing himself. Nay more ; he was now a convinced follower of Sanatana Dharma. When he married, he married in accordance with the agelong rites prescribed by Sanatana Dharma ; he dethroned the mere intellect from its usurped seat of sovereignty, and he decided henceforth to seek the Light through Yoga.

When Sri Aurobindo realized that, not a wayward fancy, but a deep and abiding faith lured him to the path of Yoga, he plunged straight into its practice. Some attempt he did make to find a Guru but without immediate success. No doubt there were *gurus* enough in India : hadn't Sri Ramakrishna deplored the paucity of *sishyas*, rather

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, pp. 58 and 203.

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than of *gurus*? Sri Aurobindo had presently momentary contacts with Sri Sadguru Brahmananda —at Ranganath on the Narmada—though only as a saintly man, and not as a guru—and had *darshan* of and blessings from that great Yogi. The ground was already prepared to a certain extent; and such contacts quickly planted the seed of spirituality and even nurtured it somewhat above the ground. Was it not a priceless gain in itself that Sri Aurobindo had realized with Teufelsdröckh that "Thought without reverence is barren, perhaps poisonous?" The Beast of Intellectualism was now verily in chains; Sri Aurobindo could therefore soar unhampered into the rose-red plane of the Empyrean; his spiritual fire-baptism had commenced at last! "It is a wonderful phenomenon," writes Swami Nikhilananda, "that the consummation of our spiritual life is reached only when the student comes in contact with the teacher."[1] Even though Sri Aurobindo had not yet found a guru, he felt himself drawn to the path of Yoga, he poised himself on its razor-edge uncertainty and perilousness, he pushed forward confidently,—although, as yet, he could not very clearly see his precise destination!

1. *Prabuddha Bharata*, March 1942, p. 127.

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CHAPTER FOUR

TRANSLATIONS

I

The Baroda period saw considerable literary activity on Sri Aurobindo's part. Soon after his arrival in Baroda, he started writing poems on Indian subjects and surroundings, expressing his first reactions to India and Indian culture after the return home and a general acquaintance with these things.

Sri Aurobindo's Bengali studies led him to revel in the raptures of Chundidas and other ancient Bengali singers ; his new-born love of Sanskrit led him to read with perennial admiration, not only the Upanishads and the Gita, but also the gem-like verses of Bhartrihari, the plays and poems of Kalidasa, and other great masterpieces in Sanskrit literature. Sri Aurobindo had once exercised his poetic talent by rendering into English Greek writers like Plato and Meleager ; he would now similarly reveal some of the beauties of Bengali and Sanskrit literatures and, incidentally, write some vigorous or beautiful English verse.

Some of Sri Aurobindo's English renderings from Bhartrihari seem to have originally appeared in the *Baroda College Magazine* in the eighteen

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nineties.[1] But the *Niti Shataka* as a whole was published under the title, *The Century of Life*, only in 1924. The renderings—they are generally "free" rather than "literal"—manage to reproduce the very pith and marrow of the originals ; they exhibit a rich variety in stanza-forms, and one can judge Sri Aurobindo's feeling for the innate beauty of words even by merely studying the titles : " The Human Cobra," " Aut Cæsar aut Nullus," " Altruism Oceanic," " The Immutable Courage," " The Script of Fate," " Flowers from a Hidden Root," " The Flame of the Soul," " Gaster Anaides," " The Rainlark to the Cloud," " Mountain Moloy," " The Might of Works," etc.

All—or almost all—these renderings from Bhartrihari are finished exercises in verse that compel one's admiration and respect. Only one or two quotations can be given here to convey a rough idea, at once of the perspicacity and wisdom of Bhartrihari, and the grace and epigrammatic finish of the English renderings. This is about the " Man of High Action ":

> Happiness is nothing, sorrow nothing. He
> Recks not of these whom his clear thoughts impel
> To action, whether little and miserably
> He fare on roots or softly dine and well,
> Whether bare ground receive his sleep or bed
> With smoothest pillows ease his pensive head,
> Whether in rags or heavenly robes he dwell.[2]

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, Publisher's Note.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 204.

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Even more sharply phrased and memorable in expression are these five lines on the " Proud Soul's Choice ":

But one God to worship, hermit Shiv or puissant Vishnu high ;
But one friend to clasp, the first of men or proud Philosophy ;
But one home to live in, Earth's imperial city or the wild ;
But one wife to kiss, Earth's sweetest face or Nature, God's own child.
Either in your world the mightiest or my desert solitary.[1]

And—to quote yet one more piece—the telling contrast elaborated in the following lines on " A Little Knowledge " does recall both the razor-edge clarity and cherry-blossom fragrance of a Japanese miniature :

When I was with a little knowledge cursed,
Like a mad elephant I stormed about,
And thought myself all-knowing. But when deep-versed
Rich minds some portion of their wealth disbursed
My poverty to raise, then for a lout
And dunce I knew myself, and the insolence went
Out from me like a fever violent.[2]

Epigrammatic and aphoristic, *The Century of Life* is reared upon experience and worldly wisdom, and the incandescent fury of poetic imagination but fitfully shines upon these verses. Nevertheless the verses are crystal-pure and also crystal-clear, and

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 219.
2 *Ibid.*, II, p. 174.

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one cannot withhold admiration from a literary craftsman who achieves lines like :

Only man's soul looks out with luminous eyes
Upon the worlds illimitably wise.....[1]
The sweet fair girl-wife broken with bridal bliss....[2]
Seven griefs are as seven daggers in my heart....[3]
In the dim-glinting womb and luminous murk....[4]
Thorns are her nature, but her face the rose....[5]

The Century of Life, like most didactic poetry, appeals to the head rather than to the heart ; but there are not wanting occasional flashes that penetrate much deeper.

II

Sri Aurobindo's rendering of *Meghaduta* in terza rima metre must have been a truly wonderful and delightful poem ; it is, however, a great pity that, along with many other original poems and translations, it is now wholly lost to us.[6] Some of the renderings from Chundidas and other Vaishnav poets have fortunately survived. *Radha's Complaint in Absence* and *Radha's Appeal* are both poems first, and adaptations only afterwards. However it

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 218.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 189.
3. *Ibid.*, II, p. 194.
4. *Ibid.*, II, p. 211.
5. *Ibid.*, II, p. 217.
6. *Ibid.*, I, Publisher's Note.

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derives its primary inspiration, the following stanza has the authentic ring and chime of poetry, and that is all that matters :

O heart, my heart, a heavy pain is thine !
What land is that where none doth know
Love's cruel name nor any word of sin ?
My heart, there let us go.[1]

It is Love's eternal faltering-unfaltering language ; it is as old as, or older than, the hills and the sea and the sky ; and it is the more poetic for that very reason. What has poetry to do with "new" things like the electric dynamo or the refrigerator or the latest vacuum cleaner ? Humanity—Man, God and Nature—these alone are the primal stuff of all poetry, and that is why we cannot help immediately responding to a stanza like :

Therefore to this sweet sanctuary I brought
My chilled and shuddering thought.
Ah, suffer, sweet,
To thy most faultless feet
That I should cling unchid ; ah, spurn me not ![2]

In another poem, *Appeal*, the poet gives a fresh rendering of the Shakespearian adage, "Youth's a stuff will not endure "[3] :

Life is a bliss that cannot long abide,
But while thou livest, love. For love the sky
Was founded, earth unheaved from the deep cry

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 29.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 30.
3. *Twelfth Night*, II, 3, l. 54.

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Of waters, and by love is sweetly tied
The golden cordage of our youth and pride.[1]

In yet another poem, *Karma*, a pretty conceit is rendered with emotion ; since Krishna will not come to Radha, she will now leap into the ocean and die—

Die and be reborn to life again
As Nanda's son, the joy of Braja's girls,
And I will make thee Radha then,
A laughing child's face set with lovely curls.
Then I will love thee and then leave.....
Then shalt thou know the bitterness of love.[2]

That these verses have been inspired by the original Bengali of Chundidas or of some other poet does not make them any the less charming as English poetry.

As a translator, Sri Aurobindo holds the healthy, but rather unorthodox, view that a translation need not be quite literal and dully flat. As he once wrote to Dilip Kumar Roy, " a translator is not necessarily bound to the original he chooses ; he can make his own poem out of it, if he likes, and that is what is generally done."[3] Literal translations may have their own dubious value as cribs for students over whom hangs the spectre of an imminent examination ; but translations like Chapman's *Homer*, Dryden's *Virgil*, Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam* and

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 133.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 132.
3. Quoted in *Anami*, p. 245.

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Binyon's *Dante* are all equally, if not quite to an equal extent, poems by right and virtue of their finished perfection and but implicitly honour their originals ; likewise, the great translator—a Chapman, a Pope, a Fitzgerald, a Romesh Chunder, a Binyon—is more a partner than a slave, and he gives us as much of himself as of the original, and the two in such harmonious combination that it is ever a puerile task to attempt to dissociate one from the other ; this, too, is the true measure of Sri Aurobindo as a translator, and hence his many renderings from Bengali and Sanskrit are as a rule poems in their own right. Indeed, some of these so-called translations are so good and so feast the ear and chasten the mind that they may more appropriately be described rather as transfigurations in terms of colour, sound and inwrought imagery.

III

The Songs of the Sea[1] is a magnificent sequence of forty pieces composed in a variety of rhythmical patterns. As translations they are said to be very close to the originals ; but they are also a continuum of poetic iridescence ; they are as much Aurobindo Ghose as they are Chittaranjan Das, and indubitable

1. The renderings from C. R. Das's *Sagar Sangit* were done, not in Baroda, but many years later in Pondicherry at the author's request ; but, along with Sri Aurobindo's other translations, *The Songs of the Sea* is conveniently considered in this Chapter.

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poetry in any case. For instance, what can be more richly conceived or more finely expressed than the following passages picked at random from *The Songs of the Sea* :

O thou unhoped-for elusive wonder of the skies,
Stand still one moment! I will lead thee and bind
With music to the chambers of my mind.
Behold how calm today this sea before me lies
And quivering with what tremulous heart of dreams
In the pale glimmer of the faint moonbeams.
If thou at last art come indeed, O mystery, stay
Woven by song into my heart-beats from this day.....[1]

Behold, the perfect-gloried dawn has come
Far-floating from eternity her home.
Her limbs are clad in silver light of dreams,
Her brilliant influence on the water streams,
And in that argent flood to one white theme
Are gathering all the hues and threads of dream.....[2]

I sit upon thy hither shore, O main,
My gaze is on thy face. Yet sleep, O sleep!
My heart is trembling with a soundless strain,
My soul is watching by thy slumber deep.....[3]

Thy huge rebuke shook all my nature, all
The narrow coasts of thought sank crumbling in.
Collapsed that play-room and that lamp was quenched.
I stood in Ocean's thunders washed and drenched.....[4]

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 249.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 252.
3. *Ibid.*, II, p. 262.
4. *Ibid.*, II, p. 269.

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This shore and that shore,—I am tired, they pall.
Where thou art shoreless, take me from it all....
I am mad for thee, O king of mysteries....
Pilot eternal, friend unknown embraced,
O, take me to thy shoreless self at last.[1]

Through extracts, however numerous, it is impossible to convey an adequate idea of the cumulative effect that these extraordinary "Songs of the Sea" produce on the receptive ear; the whole sequence should be considered one and indivisible, it is to be interpreted as the recordation of the cry of the *Jiva* for final union with the hourly experienced, yet still unapprehended, sublimity and mystery of the Universe. The sea is visualized, no doubt, in terms of colour, sound and rhythm; but the sea is not simply the Bay of Bengal or the Indian Ocean, but something much more elemental and much more ethereal as well. As it is to Ellidda in Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*, to Chittaranjan and to Sri Aurobindo the sea is a veritable symbol of romance, a baffling concretion of multifoliate Nature, of its reserves of power no less than its undying mystery. The arts of echo and refrain, of assonance and dissonance, of variation in movement through the adroit placing of polysyllabic words like "solitude of shoreless sound" or "myriad serpents of infinitude" to give added weight and momentum to the verse, all these are mobilized, controlled and

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 273.

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converted into an abiding expression of the bottomless depth and mystery as also of the ineluctable and " ineffugable " lure and fascination of the sea.

The student of English poetry sometimes wonders if the qualities that we associate with Byron's apostrophe to the Ocean in *Childe Harold* and with Shelley's *West Wind* can ever be found subsisting in harmony in the same poem; one cannot quite imagine how the thing could be done—until one reads Sri Aurobindo's poetic sequence, *The Songs of the Sea*. The sea is successfully evoked in a hundred and one different ways—it is the " unhoped-for elusive wonder of the skies," it is the " Infinite Voice," it is the " minstrel of infinity," it is the " shoreless main," it is the " great mad sea," it is the " illimitable," it is the " mighty One," and it is the " king of mysteries"; the poet thus approaches the sea as a friend, as a lover, as a loyal subject, as a devotee, as a shadow that must ever pursue the object, as a waif that would return to the bosom of the mother; and the music with its subtle undulations of dissolving sweetness fuses at last poet and reader and subject into a closed universe of harmony and bliss.

The Songs of the Sea, then, are only superficially Nature poems; more particularly, they are impassioned lyrics, with a core of purposeful spirituality in them that places the sequence in a category apart, not very far from mystical poetry.

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IV

Of Sri Aurobindo's translations, only one other major work remains to be considered—*The Hero and the Nymph*. It was done, so we learn from Mr. Nolini Kanta Gupta, in Baroda in the early years of the present century.[1] In attempting to render *Vikramorvasie* into English verse, Sri Aurobindo successfully braved a much more difficult task than when he translated Chundidas or Bhartrihari or even Chittaranjan. A play of Kalidasa's, romantic, tantalizing, and strangely and attractively remote from everyday experience, *Vikramorvasie* cannot easily be coaxed into changing her robes; but Sri Aurobindo has performed the feat, and we have in result *The Hero and the Nymph*. Like Laurence Binyon's *Sakuntala*, Sri Aurobindo's *The Hero and the Nymph* also fairly reproduces the fever and the flavour of the original and succeeds in making Kalidasa himself feel at home in an alien garb.

The story is briefly told: Pururavas, the vanquisher of the Titans, is smitten with love for Urvasie, a beautiful nymph; Pururavas is already married, and there are the inevitable complications; and, of course, there is a divinity that shapes our ends and all's well that ends well! We visit arbours and are ravished by the moonlight; we scale great mountain heights, we visit Saint Bharat's hermitage

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, Publisher s Note.

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in heaven itself, we watch the adorations, the fertile tears, the queer antics, and the blissful ecstasies of Pururavas and Urvasie. It is the quintessence of romance; and Sri Aurobindo has succeeded in capturing and communicating much of the elusive fascination of the original to English readers.

The motif of the play is no more characteristically Hindu than it is Hellenic; and Sri Aurobindo, with his profound intimacy with both cultures, has given us a rendering which can be described as a true work of art. Description, dialogue, distraction, jealousy, fervour, pleasantry, humour, all are here; and blank verse, as handled by Sri Aurobindo, is seen to be an elastic enough instrument for the expression of all these vagaries and varieties of emotion and passion. One may laugh at, or with, Manavaka the Brahmin jester and the King's companion, whose jokes and deepest observations alike originate from his inveterate gluttony. He is rather disagreeably loud when he plays the clown in prose:

> "Houp! Houp! I feel like a Brahmin who has had an invitation to dinner; he thinks dinner, talks dinner, looks dinner, his very sneeze has the music of the dinner-bell in it."[1]

But elsewhere Manavaka's humour is more delightfully capricious and has the added charm of being expressed in the nervous rhythms of ordinary

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 16.

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speech :

> Yes, I too when I cannot get sweet venison
> And hunger for it, often beguile my belly
> With celebrating all its savoury joys.....[1]
>
> Why, what is there in Heaven to pine for ? There
> You do not eat, you do not drink, only
> Stare like so many fishes in a row
> With wide unblinking eyes.[2]

But the play's real merit centres in the exquisite love drama, of which Pururavas and Urvasie are the protagonists. They find and lose and lose and find themselves over and over again, and these alternations determine the general rhythm of the play. Pururavas, coming upon Urvasie as she stands, " her eyes closed in terror, supported on the right arm of Chitralekha," thus gallantly addresses her :

> O thou too lovely !
> Recall thy soul. The enemies of Heaven
> Can injure thee no more ; that danger's over.
> The Thunderer's puissance still pervades the worlds.
> O then uplift these long and lustrous eyes
> Like sapphire lilies in a pool where dawn
> Comes smiling.[3]

How deftly is the transition achieved from the terrific energy of the Thunderer's puissance to the " long lustrous eyes " of the celestial nymph !

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 48.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 58.
3. *Ibid.*, II, p. 6.

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The same command over sound values in English and the dynamics of blank verse is revealed in many another passage as well, where the verse luxuriates into arabesque and gives us descriptions like these :

'Tis noon. The tired
And heated peacock sinks to chill delight
Of water in the tree-encircling channel,
The bee divides a crimson bud and creeps
Into its womb ; there merged and safe from fire,
He's lurking. The duck too leaves her blazing pool
And shelters in cold lilies on the bank,
And in yon summer-house weary of heat
The parrot from his cage for water cries.....[1]

How beautifully twilight sits and dreams
Upon these palace walls ! The peacocks now
Sit on their perches, drowsed with sleep and night,
Like figures hewn in stone. And on the roof
The fluttering pigeons with their pallid wings
Mislead the eye, disguised as rings of smoke
That from the window-ways have floated out
Into the evening.....[2]

The lily of the night
Needs not to guess it is the moon's cool touch.
She starts not to the sunbeam.[3]

Noon or twilight or night, Nature yields her charms to the poet, and Sri Aurobindo paints them memorably with his English brush !

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 39.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 42.
3. *Ibid.*, II, p. 56.

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Later still, Pururavas strings together many pathetic fallacies and felicities in description into one long, nervous, and poetically effective blank verse symphony. Exclamation, distraction, surprise, reminiscence, bitter regrets, hopes that seem hopeless, apostrophes, accusations, piercing shrieks, sedate ruminations, all these are thrown seemingly helter-skelter into one prolonged effusion of truly moving poetry. Sri Aurobindo deftly manages the shifting rhythms and one not merely feels and hears but literally *sees* the whole action unrolling before one's eyes. Simply as a technical achievement, these ten pages of blank verse must be rated very high indeed. Pururavas hurries forward, hoping to reach the hands of Urvasie ; he is mistaken—

> Me miserable ! This was
> No anklets' cry embraceable with hands,
> But moan of swans who seeing the great wet sky
> Grow passionate for Himaloy's distant tarns.
> Well, be it so. But ere in far desire
> They leap up from this pool, I well might learn
> Tidings from them of Urvasie.[1]

In Venkatanatha's *Hamsa Sandesa,* Rama accosts a swan and (after the manner of the Yaksha in *Meghaduta*) sends through her a message to Sita. It is no use dismissing such things as conceits or as pathetic fallacies ; in expert hands they prove rather the very stuff of poetry. Pururavas thus addresses in turn

1. *Collected Poems and Plays,* II, p. 68.

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the swan, the chocrobacque " all saffron and vermilion," the " lotus-wooing bee," the " rut-dripping elephant "; he is attracted specially to the elephant :

> More to thee I stand
> Attracted, elephant, as like with like.
> Sovereign of sovereigns is my title, thou
> Art monarch of the kingly elephants,
> And this wide freedom of thy fragrant rut
> Interminable imitates my own
> Vast liberality to suppliant men,
> Regally ; thou hast in all the herd this mate,
> I among loveliest women Urvasie.
> In all things art thou like me ; only I pray,
> O friend, that thou mayest never know the pang,
> The loss.[1]

Pururavas cannot see Urvasie still ; the place is too dark ; there are no streaks of lightning either—the stupendous cloud itself

> Is widowed of the lightning through my sin.[2]

Pururavas will not lose hope yet ; he will question the " huge pile of scaling crags "; he will frantically clutch at the accents of the Echo—and he falls down in a swoon screaming out to the crags and the mountain glens the name of his beloved. And so we watch, as does Urvasie herself, the incredible vicissitudes of her lover's agony till at last, almost as exhausted as is Pururavas himself, we are relieved to know that the lovers are re-united indeed ; and

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 71.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 71.

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we can even catch a glimpse of the celestial nymph as her delighted lover accosts her as follows :

> Thus stand a while. O fairest,
> Thy face suffused with crimson from this gem
> Above thee pouring wide its fire and splendour,
> Has all the beauty of a lotus reddening
> In early sunlight.[1]

At Sri Aurobindo's magic touch, Kalidasa's superb figures are rekindled into a flame of beauty and in consequence his immortal play has acquired almost a fresh habitation and name in the realm of English poetry.

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 77.

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CHAPTER FIVE

NARRATIVE AND DRAMATIC POETRY

I

Even before Sri Aurobindo started on his English version of Kalidasa's *Vikramorvasie*, he had been sufficiently captivated by the theme to produce a long narrative poem on the subject. *Urvasie* was first published in Baroda in 1896 ; it thus belongs to the period of Sri Aurobindo's first years in Baroda. It is divided into four Cantos and its length is roughly 1,500 lines.

The story of *Urvasie* is substantially Kalidasa's still ; but it is here rendered as a metrical romance in highly flexible blank verse. Admirably proportioned, *Urvasie* is interspersed with many passages that evoke colour and sound with a sure and brilliant artistry ; and not seldom the words move like winged squadrons, radiating a nervous potency of suggestion romantic to the marrow.

Sri Aurobindo, desiring to treat the story of Pururavas and Urvasie on an epic scale and desiring, further, to underline its national significance, has made certain departures from the purely dramatic presentation of the theme in Kalidasa's play. Pururavas and Urvasie have longed for each other, they

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have at last come together; she is in his arms, "clinging and shuddering":

> She, o'erborne,
> Panting, with inarticulate murmurs lay,
> Like a slim tree half seen through driving hail,
> Her naked arms clasping his neck, her cheek
> And golden throat averted, and wide trouble
> In her large eyes bewildered with their bliss.
> Amid her wind-blown hair their faces met.
> With her sweet limbs all his, feeling her breasts
> Tumultuous up against his beating heart,
> He kissed the glorious mouth of heaven's desire.
> So clung they as two shipwrecked in a surge.[1]

Having won Urvasie, Pururavas can never have too much of her; they form, as it were, a closed universe where sensuous pleasure is the hourly law:

> But in their fortunate heavens the high gods
> Dwelt infelicitous, losing the old
> Rapture inexplicable and thrill beneath
> Their ancient calm. Therefore not long enduring,
> They in colossal council marble, said
> To that bright sister whom she had loved best,
> "Menaca!" crying "how long shall one man
> Divide from heaven its most perfect bliss?
> Go down and bring her back, our bright one back,
> And we shall love again our luminous halls".[2]

Urvasie has now to return to heaven, and Pururavas is disconsolate; he leaves his kingdom, he seeks his

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 59.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 63.

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beloved on hill and dale and glen and grotto, till at length he meets Luxmie, the "patroness of Aryasthan." He tells her the name of his "termless wide desire"; and "like a viol" she returns this prophetic reply:

> Sprung of the moon, thy grandsire's fault in thee
> Yet lives; but since thy love is singly great,
> Doubtless thou shalt possess thy whole desire.
> Yet hast thou maimed the future and discrowned
> The Aryan people; for though Ila's sons,
> In Hustina, the city of elephants,
> And Indraprusta, future towns, shall rule
> Drawing my peoples to one sceptre, at last
> Their power by excess of beauty falls,—
> Thy sin, Pururavas—of beauty and love:
> And this the land divine to impure grasp
> Yields of barbarians from the outer shores.[1]

Notwithstanding the unnatural inversion in the last two lines, the speech embodies a core of historical truth and eloquently utters a note of prophetic warning, as pertinent to-day as it was when Pururavas faced the austere goddess and patroness of Aryasthan.

Of course, Pururavas goes his own way and finds his felicity in the arms of Urvasie; but—

> far below through silent mighty space
> The green and strenuous earth abandoned rolled.[2]

He had won a sort of personal salvation, no doubt;

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 77.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 82.

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but even he, " bright soul," had failed to rise to the heights of the opportunity presented to him ; he had failed India, he had failed humanity ; " but God blames not nor punishes !"

> Impartially he deals
> To every strenuous spirit its chosen reward.[1]

Apart from the underlying message, *Urvasie* has all the usual felicities in diction and style associated with epic poetry. Expanded similes, Nature descriptions, arrays of polysyllabic proper names, eloquent speeches, all these are true to type ; and the whole action hinges upon a Temptation, a temptation to which the hero succumbs ; it is therefore not inappropriate to call *Urvasie* an epic or an epyllion. If the Temptation gives it its sense of unity and its wide human interest, the strings of proper names and the elaborate similes make the poem æsthetically beautiful. For instance, here have we no more than a catalogue of names, and yet the result is charming poetry :

> So danced they numberless as dew-drops gleam,
> Menaca, Misracayshie, Mullica,
> Rumbha, Nelabha, Shela, Nolinie,
> Lolita, Lavonya and Tilottama,—
> Many delightful names.....[2]

Again, doesn't an expanded simile like the following reproduce, and more than reproduce, the apposite-

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 80.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 40.

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ness as well as the elaboration of typical epic similes :

As when a child falls asleep unawares
At a closed window on a stormy day,
Looking into the weary rain, and long
Sleeps, and wakes quietly into a life
Of ancient moonlight, first the thoughtfulness
Of that felicitous world to which the soul
Is visitor in sleep, keeps her sublime
Discurtained eyes ; human dismay comes next,
Slowly ; last, sudden, they brighten, and grow wide
With recognition of an altered world,
Delighted : so woke Urvasie to love.[1]

Urvasie is the work of a young man ; it has youth's boldness, idealism, intuition of romantic imagery, and feeling for the sheer beauty of language. It is Sri Aurobindo's *Endymion ;* but an *Endymion* transferred, by sleight of hand, to Aryasthan and rendered in terms of immemorial Hindu thought.

II

Urvasie was followed by another narrative poem, *Love and Death.* Though it was composed in the closing years of the last century, it was not published till 1921. Somewhat shorter than the earlier poem, *Love and Death* sweeps on its course with the same intensity of emotion and similar richness of music. The Hellenic story of Orpheus and Eurydice is almost transformed into a magic tale of love and

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, pp. 45-6.

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death and immortality, typically Hindu in setting, sentiments and language.

Here is the story: Ruru, Sage Bhrigu's grandson, loves Priyumvada, daughter of Menaca the nymph and the Gandharva King; it is a beautiful idyll that is pictured in these lines:

Fresh-cheeked and dew-eyed white Priyumvada
Opened her budded heart of crimson bloom
To love, to Ruru; Ruru, a happy flood
Of passion round a lotus dancing thrilled,
Blinded with his soul's waves Priyumvada.
To him the earth was a bed for this sole flower,
To her all the world was filled with his embrace.[1]

Next follow two or three pages of almost the apotheosis of sensuous poetry; Ruru and Priyumvada are so very, very happy that he laughs towards the sun and cries:

how good it is to live, to love!
Surely our joy shall never end, nor we
Grow old, but like bright rivers or pure winds
Sweetly continue, or revive with flowers,
Or live at least as long as senseless trees.[2]

But no; Priyumvada is presently bitten by a snake and sinks to the ground. The poor girl's dying speech is most touching:

And I have had so little
Of joy and the wild day and throbbing night,
Laughter, and tenderness, and strife and tears.

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 85.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 88.

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I have not numbered half the brilliant birds
In one green forest, nor am familiar grown
With sunrise and the progress of the eves,
Nor have with plaintive cries of birds made friends,
Cuckoo and rainlark and love-speak-to-me.[1]

As yet unreconciled to the event, Priyumvada dies, and is borne away to " some distant greenness." Night descends upon Ruru and his soul is now synonymous with " the great silence"; he gives vent to the edge of his desolate grief, and aimlessly wanders in the forest; he undergoes experiences that both hold promises to his ear and break them to his heart. He meets at last Kama, " who makes many worlds one fire," and acquaints him with his miserable predicament. The God of Love offers Ruru a ray of hope; he could proceed to the nether world and redeem Priyumvada from " immitigable death "—but only on one fearful condition :

Life the pale ghost requires : with half thy life
Thou mayest protract the thread too early cut
Of that delightful spirit—half sweet life.
O Ruru, lo, thy frail precarious days,
And yet how sweet they are ! simply to breathe
How warm and sweet ! And ordinary things
How exquisite, thou then shalt learn when lost,
How luminous the daylight was, mere sleep
How soft and friendly clasping tired limbs,
And the deliciousness of common food.
And things indifferent thou then shalt want,

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, pp. 89-90.

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Regret rejected beauty, brightnesses
Bestowed in vain. Wilt thou yield up, O lover,
Half thy sweet portion of this light and gladness,
Thy little insufficient share, and vainly
Give to another ?[1]

Of course, he will ; he journeys to the ocean and exhorts her to split up her abysses to his mortal tread ; she answers his prayer—

And like a living thing the huge sea trembled,
Then rose, calling, and filled the sight with waves,
Converging all its giant crests ; towards him
Innumerable waters loomed and heaven
Threatened. Horizon on horizon moved
Dreadfully swift ; then with a prone wide sound
All Ocean hollowing drew him swiftly in,
Curving with monstrous menace over him.
He down the gulf where the loud waves collapsed
Descending, saw with floating hair arise
The daughters of the sea in pale green light,
A million mystic breasts suddenly bare,
And came beneath the flood and stunned beheld
A mute stupendous march of waters race
To reach some viewless pit beneath the world.[2]

Thus Ruru reaches, though not without " agony of soul," the " grey waste " of Patala. The nether world is now described with excruciating vividness, sharply reminding one of Milton's vivification of Hell in *Paradise Lost* or Dante's conjuring up of Inferno in *The Divine Comedy*. We meet the

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 100.
2. *Ibid.*, I, pp. 104-5.

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incredible inhabitants of Patala and share Ruru's poignant thoughts; we pass on, an impossible tourist in this "Death's other kingdom"; we are near the throne of Hades; we hear muttered exclamations and explanations; we see the giant dogs, four-eyed and mysterious, as they raise "their dreaded heads"; we hear at last the Great God Yama, discoursing wisely on Love, and Youth, and Age, and Immortality.

Once more a Temptation scene thrillingly unfolds itself before our eyes. Pururavas would give up his kingdom and all opportunity for unblemished service rather than live without Urvasie; Ruru would likewise give up the mature, "fruit-bearing" years of his life in return for the life of Priyumvada. Yama is as overwhelmed by regret as is Goddess Luxmie at the failure of Pururavas to live up to a great ideal. Neither Luxmie nor Yama plays the role of a Tempter; rather they place the alternatives squarely before Pururavas and Ruru, who are alike poised on the crest of the dread predicament, "Fixt Fate—Free Will"!

In vain Yama tries to persuade Ruru to give up Priyumvada. In vain he expatiates on the privileges of old age:

> Yet thou bethink thee, mortal,
> Not as a tedious evil nor to be
> Lightly rejected gave the gods old age,
> But tranquil, but august, but making easy
> The steep ascent to God. Therefore must Time
> Still batter down the glory and form of youth

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And animal magnificent strong ease,
To warn the earthward man that he is spirit
Dallying with transience, nor by death he ends,
Nor to the dumb warm mother's arms is bound,
But called unborn into the unborn skies.[1]

Ruru should not forget that (in Browning's language) "youth shows but half"; he should not lightly renounce the latter half of his life. On the contrary, should he but live the full quota of his appointed life, he would surely grow

divine with age,
A Rishi to whom infinity is close,
Rejoicing in green wood or musical shade
Or boundless mountain-top where most we feel
Wideness, not by small happy things disturbed.[2]

Ruru even catches the vision splendid, "the dawn of that mysterious Face and all the universe in beauty merge"; and yet he will not accept the promised Felicity; he would give back, in Ivan Karamazov's pithy expression, "the ticket"—if only Priyumvada could be restored to him! Ruru is now once again in the world of common sight and sound, Priyumvada is alive and is lying by his side:

For many moments comforting his soul
With all her jasmine body sun-ensnared
He fed his longing eyes.....

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 111.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 113.

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.....the earth breathed round them,
Glad of her children and the koil's voice
Persisted in the morning of the world.[1]

Love's labour's won! But the victory is only a defeat in disguise. Pururavas the Kshatriya failed; Ruru the Brahmin also has failed; of either of them it might be said, slightly modifying Goldsmith's lines on Burke:

Born for the universe, he narrowed up his mind,
And to himself gave what was meant for mankind.

No Satan, no Achitophel, no Manthara, no Iago tempted Pururavas or Ruru; they were but betrayed by what was false within. The Temptation was enacted, in the last resort, only in the theatres of their souls; but it is the more intensely dramatic and significant for that very reason!

III

The most amazing, perhaps, of Sri Aurobindo's early poetic compositions is the blank verse drama, *Perseus the Deliverer*. According to Mr. Nolini Kanta Gupta, this drama "was written somewhere between the end of the nineties and the first years of the following decade."[2] It was first published serially in 1907 in the columns of the weekly edition

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 115.
2. *Ibid.*, I, Publisher's Note.

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of *The Bandemataram* and has been very recently reprinted in the *Collected Poems and Plays.*

It required not a little of courage and self-confidence on Sri Aurobindo's part to embark upon this adventure of rendering a hoary Greek myth in the language of modern thought; but, then, nothing succeeds like success, and Sri Aurobindo has certainly achieved something of a *tour-de-force* that satisfies us as drama, as poetry, and also as an imaginative presentation of the ideas of evolution and progress.

Perseus, the heroic hero of ancient Hellas, is portrayed in this play as a veritable hero indeed, but a hero who inaugurates a forward movement in the story of humanity as the result of a monumental clash of mighty opposites; in him we are made to see " the first promptings of the deeper and higher psychic and spiritual being which it is his (Man's) ultimate destiny to become."[1] The conflict in the play is both individual and cosmic; and the conflict is waged in different ways and on different levels. Cepheus, King of Syria, is pitted against Polydaon, Priest of Poseidon; Pallas Athene is pitted against Poseidon, in other words, Wisdom is up against brute Force; one might almost say, the Devas are waging a bitter war against the Asuras!

Sri Aurobindo thus conceives the conflict as being somewhat in the nature of a Hegelian dialectic;

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 174.

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man shall progress indeed, as he has already progressed so much along the corridors of the past, but only if he is still prepared to brave and to ride successfully on the crests and cusps, the checks and counter-checks, that inevitably punctuate his life. Evil and anarchy and seeming defeat cannot for ever bar man's onward march; Pallas therefore hurls this deathless challenge at Poseidon :

> Therefore I bid thee not,
> O azure strong Poseidon, to abate
> Thy savage tumults : rather his march oppose.
> For through the shocks of difficulty and death
> Man shall attain his godhead.[1]

According to Sri Aurobindo, the Heraclitan maxim—" all is flux, nothing is stationary "—is by itself not very helpful or consoling ; what Heraclitus, on the contrary, really tells us is just this : " all indeed comes into being according to strife, but also all things come into being according to Reason, *kat erin* but also *kata ton logon*."[2] It is this expanded Heraclitan message that is given eloquent expression to in the last lines of Sri Aurobindo's play :

CASSIOPEA : How can the immortal gods and Nature change ?

PERSEUS : All alters in a world that is the same.
Man most must change who is a soul of Time ;
His gods too change and live in larger light.

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 179.
2. Sri Aurobindo, *Heraclitus*, p. 62.

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CEPHEUS : Then man too may arise to greater heights,
His being draw nearer to the gods ?

PERSEUS : Perhaps.
But the blind nether forces still have power
And the ascent is slow and long is Time.
Yet shall Truth grow and harmony increase :
The day shall come when men feel close and one.
Meanwhile one forward step is something gained,
Since little by little earth must open to heaven
Till her dim soul awakes into the Light.[1]

Here can be discovered the germs of the thought that was later to grow in volume and substance and fill the ample halls and quadrangles of *The Life Divine.*

" All alters in a world that is the same !" In other words, there is a fact of Becoming as well as a fact of Being ; " to deny one or the other is easy ; to recognize the facts of consciousness and find out their relation is the true and fruitful wisdom."[2] A preliminary, poetic gleam of this wisdom lights up and shows the significance of the struggle between Perseus and the sea-monster ; its full implications were to be worked out in the fullness of time when Sri Aurobindo would make his readers realize that " the principle of the process of evolution is a foundation, from that foundation an ascent, in that ascent a reversal of consciousness and, from the greater height and wideness gained, an action of

1. *Collected Poems and Plays,* I, p. 306.
2. *The Life Divine* (References are to the First Edition), I, p. 119.

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change and new integration of the whole nature."[1]

And yet, for all its " message " or indeed because of its perennial urgency, *Perseus the Deliverer* is essentially a play of action, full of the rush and tumult of both a human and a cosmic conflict, and it is therefore breathlessly interesting as sheer drama. The dialogues are poetically intense and yet but rarely sound unnatural ; the prose bits are full of pep and are not seldom drenched in indecorous gaiety ; but Sri Aurobindo's art excels itself in the great blank verse passages which accurately evoke either the terrible plight of an Andromeda chained to the cliff or the insane and inflated blood-lust of a Polydaon or yet the radiant serenity, the confident strength and the prophetic intensity of a Perseus. Poetic drama in English is not dead ; T. S. Eliot and Sri Aurobindo have now shown that serious drama *can* be written in verse even to-day.

In *Perseus the Deliverer* we have a diverting variety of characters, and they are most of them very carefully differentiated. Besides the major characters, who have been drawn on a heroic scale, we have interesting types and comic creations as well. Many interests and many men are shown as working together for the downfall of the Syrian King and his family ; but the popular leader and demagogue, Therops, is himself frightened by the

1. *The Life Divine*, II, p. 656.

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new tyrants that his own oratory has placed in power. He is ready to agree with Dercetes, the Syrian Captain, when he says :

> Therops, 'twould be a nightmare,
> The rule of that fierce priest and fiercer rabble.[1]

Cireas, the outspoken and humorous servant in the temple of Poseidon, makes the appropriate comment on Therops, the " crowd-compeller " and " eloquent Zeus of the market-place ":

> " This it is to be an orator ! We shall hear him haranguing the people next market-day on fidelity to princes and the divine right of queens to have favourites."[2]

Likewise, the abject and wretchedly selfish Babylonian merchant, Smerdas, is very convincingly portrayed and contrasted with Tyrnaus, another merchant from Babylon.

The " heroic " characters, Perseus, Cassiopea, Queen of Syria, her daughter Andromeda, her son Iolaus, the opportunist Phineas, King of Tyre, all are vividly and boldly delineated. But Polydaon, Priest of Poseidon, easily dominates the play, which may almost be called the *Tragedy of Polydaon.* As in Shylock's character, in Polydaon's also one can discover both ludicrous and tragic lineaments. For a brief spell, Polydaon is an instrument of destiny ; he is puffed up, he is immense in his own and in

1. *Collected Poems and Plays,* I, p. 284.
2. *Ibid.,* I, p. 296.

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his people's eyes ; he is an engine of evil, gloating over his mad thirst for blood and lust for power ; he will revel in death and destruction ; he will make crimson rivers irrigate Syria's gardens ; he will fill them with heads instead of lilacs ; his destiny is—so he imagines—to will what he desires and to achieve what he wills. Polydaon is certainly other than human when, as the " madness gains upon him," he gesticulates wildly and soliloquizes as follows :

The world shall long recall King Polydaon.
I will paint Syria gloriously with blood.
Hundreds shall daily die to incarnadine
The streets of my city and my palace floors,
For I would walk in redness. I'll plant my gardens
With heads instead of lilacs. Hecatombs
Of men shall groan their hearts out for my pleasure
In crimson rivers.....
Nobles and slaves, men, matrons, boys and virgins
At matins and at vespers shall be slain
To me in my magnificent high temple
Beside my thunderous Ocean.....
I am athirst, magnificently athirst,
And for a red and godlike wine.....
..... I am not Polydaon,
I am a god, a mighty dreadul god,
The multitudinous mover in the sea,
The shaker of the earth : I am Poseidon
And I will walk in three tremendous paces
Climbing the mountains with my clamorous waters
And see my dogs eat up Andromeda.....

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Sit'st thou, my elder brother, charioted
In clouds ? Look down, O brother Zeus, and see
My actions ! they merit thy immortal gaze.[1]

But Polydaon presently meets more than his match when Perseus—"the mighty son of Zeus and Danaë" —confronts him and meets his challenge. Polydaon is made to realize his failure—Poseidon's failure ; his vision is clouded, he is a prey to conflicting spasms of thought ; but he dimly visualizes the new " brilliant god," the new Poseidon, Olympian and Greek, who is to replace the terrible old-Mediterranean god of the sea. Polydaon supplicates to Perseus and falls back dead. It is now left to Perseus—who is " divine-human " throughout—to sum up Polydaon's twisted career, incidentally describing also, with a peculiar force and accuracy, some of the seeming supermen-dictators of our own times :

This man for a few hours became the vessel
Of an occult and formidable Force
And through his form it did fierce terrible things
Unhuman : but his small and gloomy mind
And impure dark heart could not contain the Force.
It turned in him to madness and demoniac
Huge longings. Then the Power withdrew from him
Leaving the broken incapable instrument,
And all its might was spilt from his body. Better
To be a common man mid common men
And live an unaspiring mortal life

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, pp. 266-7.

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Than call into oneself a Titan strength
Too dire and mighty for its human frame,
That only afflicts the oppressed astonished world,
Then breaks its user.[1]

That surely is one of the peaks of divination in the whole body of Sri Aurobindo's poetry !

There are many more passages in the play which have a relevance to us here and now, and could be quoted here if space permitted ; and, indeed, the play is full of overtones and undertones to which it is not at all possible to do justice now. Hellenic myth and Renaissance values, poetic symbolism and Aryan wisdom, romance, humour, comedy, satire, all are here thrown into the retort and shaken into a compound. To conclude in Sri Aurobindo's own words :

"Time there is more than Einsteinian in its relativity, the creative imagination is its sole disposer and arranger ; fantasy reigns sovereign ; the names of ancient countries and peoples are brought in only as fringes of a decorative background ; anachronisms romp in wherever they can get an easy admittance, ideas and associations from all climes and epochs mingle ; myth, romance and realism make up a single whole. For here the stage is the human mind of all times."[2]

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, pp. 290-1.
2 *Ibid.*, I, pp. 173-4.

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CHAPTER SIX

MISCELLANEOUS POETRY

I

Between 1895 and 1908, Sri Aurobindo composed, in addition to *Urvasie, Love and Death* and *Perseus the Deliverer*, a number of shorter poems also, generally inspired by his growing philosophical and political preoccupations. Of these, *Vidula* was " a free poetic paraphrase " of four adhyayas in the Udyog-parva of the *Mahabharata*, and it appeared originally under the title " The Mother to Her Son " in the weekly edition of *The Bandemataram* in June 1907 ; *Baji Prabhou*, a historical poem of action, although composed a little earlier, appeared serially in the Weekly paper, *The Karmayogin*, only in 1910. These two poems were thus conceived and written during the first years of Sri Aurobindo's political action in Calcutta ; but they are conveniently discussed in this chapter, since they undoubtedly gain in significance when considered in close relation with *Urvasie, Love and Death* and *Perseus the Deliverer*.

On the other hand, the philosophical poems written between 1895 and 1908 appeared only in 1915, under the title *Ahana and Other Poems*. The

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title piece, *Ahana*, has since been "enlarged and recast" and hence in its present form it properly belongs to a later period of Sri Aurobindo's career; it can therefore be more profitably studied in a subsequent chapter along with Sri Aurobindo's *Nine Poems*, *Six Poems*, and *Transformation and Other Poems*.

II

Baji Prabhou is a story of Maratha heroism and is told with becoming dignity and force, its rhythm and language being of a piece with its sanguinary theme. Sri Aurobindo will not give us a moment's respite, but fairly plunges—*in medias res*—into the heart of the bloody conflict.

After fighting a disastrous battle, Shivaji is in hot retreat, with the enemy in close pursuit:

> At last they reached a tiger-throated gorge
> Upon the way to Raigurh. Narrowing there
> The hills draw close, and their forbidding cliffs
> Threaten the prone incline.[1]

Shivaji, in dire extremity, summons Baji Prabhou and entrusts him with the defence of that crucial gorge. Baji accepts the charge with this eloquent asseveration of his faith:

> not in this living net
> Of flesh and nerve, nor in the flickering mind

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 102.

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Is a man's manhood seated. God within
Rules us, who in the Brahmin and the dog
Can, if He will, show equal godhead. Not
By men is mightiness achieved ; Baji
Or Malsure is but a name, a robe,
And covers One alone. We but employ
Bhavani's strength, who in an arm of flesh
Is mighty as in the thunder and the storm.[1]

Shivaji goes back to Raigurh to bring reinforcements, leaving Baji and his fifty men to guard the pass. Presently the enemy is sighted in the distance—

a mingled mass,
Pathan and Mogul and the Rajput clans,
All clamorous with the brazen throats of war
And spitting smoke and fire.[2]

The determined group of defensive Marathas hurls back wave upon wave of enemy detachments ; and still they come :

They came, they died ; still on the previous dead
New dead fell thickening. Yet by paces slow
The lines advanced with labour infinite
And merciless expense of valiant men.[3]

Sri Aurobindo describes the vicissitudes of this modern Thermopylæ with remorseless particularity. The Pathan infantry, " a formidable array "; the " hero sons " of Rajasthan, " playmate of death ";

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 104.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 105.
3. *Ibid.*, II, p. 106.

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the chivalrous sons of Agra; they all come—one horde after another—with the stern determination to force the pass, regardless of expense; and so—

> the fatal gorge
> Filled with the clamour of the close-locked fight.
> Sword rang on sword, the slogan shout, the cry
> Of guns, the hiss of bullets filled the air,
> And murderous strife heaped up the scanty space,
> Rajput and strong Mahratta breathing hard
> In desperate battle.[1]

The horror—and the pity—of it all! And so the narrative proceeds, with an inhuman precipitancy, to the recordation of the final deathless scene. Numbers tell at last; Baji's bullets fail, all his store of shot and powder is exhausted. Baji exhorts his brave men to make iron of their souls and fight on still, with the firm faith that Bhavani will give them her own strength and sword, and secure victory in the end.

While the afternoon mellows into evening, Baji's men continue to fight with fanatic courage and desperate determination against "Agra's chivalry glancing with gold"; the Maratha mountaineers prove ultimately more than a match for the city-dwellers of Agra:

> So fought they for a while; then suddenly
> Upon the Prabhou all the Goddess came.
> Loud like a lion hungry on the hills
> He shouted, and his stature seemed to increase

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 108.

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Striding upon the foe.....
The relics of the murderous strife remained,
Corpses and jewels, broidery and gold.[1]

But the enemy would not accept defeat; and the fierce conflict was resumed with a deadlier ferocity. A sword now found out Baji's shoulder, " sharp a Moghul lance ran grinding through his arm."[2]

Baji is mortally wounded, and yet is he but broken—not bent. The battle rages as wild as ever, Baji's fifty men are reduced to fifteen; not minding his own wound, Baji charges against the enemy for the last time, " like a bull with lowered horns that runs "....but already Shivaji is back with a formidable force and the Raigurh trumpets fill the air and the Raigurh lances glisten in the " glory of the sinking sun." Baji has indeed saved the situation, but he himself sinks to the ground :

Quenched was the fiery gaze, nerveless the arm :
Baji lay dead in the unconquered gorge.[3]

Written in expressive, nervous and deeply moving blank verse, *Baji Prabhou* is a very good heroic poem; it arrestingly opens with this unforgettable description of midday :

A noon of Deccan with its tyrant glare
Oppressed the earth; the hills stood deep in haze,

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 112.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 113.
3. *Ibid.*, II, p. 114.

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And sweltering athirst the fields glared up
Longing for water in the courses parched
Of streams long dead.[1]

It closes at the moment when defeat is turned into victory and Baji Prabhou becomes, by the very act of losing his life, an heir to immortality. The poem is thus rich in tragedy that both ennobles and exalts the subject.

In Sri Aurobindo, Baji Prabhou has indeed found a minstrel worthy of his imperishable sacrifice; but the poet has wisely refrained from diminishing either the stature or the heroism of Baji Prabhou's antagonists; Pathan, or Rajput, or Moghul, the enemy is brave, even as the Maratha is; but Baji out-tops them all! Sri Aurobindo seems to say—though he does not say it in so many words—that whoever would save his soul must be prepared first to lose his life for a worthy cause; sacrifice offered at the altar of a noble ideal is alone the true gateway to the soul's immortality and freedom. By dying, Baji Prabhou died not; he lives, and will live for ever in men's memories and bosoms. A country that would redeem itself needs heroes of the stamp of Baji Prabhou; and was it not the duty and the privilege of Indians to prove worthy of such heroes,—heroes who could live for a great ideal and also die for it?

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 101.

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III

In *Baji Prabhou*, Sri Aurobindo transfigured a historical episode into a narrative poem—a poem that has already elected itself to an honourable place among the heroic poems in the English language—a poem that is both meritorious as poetry and effective as a political sermon ; in *Vidula*, on the other hand, Sri Aurobindo deftly made a mere *Mahabharata* tale,—an old, old story,—acquire a peculiar contemporaneous urgency.

Vidula originally appeared under the title, " The Mother to Her Son." The mother is Vidula, a widowed queen ; her son, Sunjoy, has been dispossessed of his kingdom by the King of Sindhu. Sunjoy has grown apathetic ; he will not lift his finger to regain the throne of his forefathers. He feels that, circumstanced as he is, all attempts to oust the proud conqueror must prove futile ; he therefore " plays for safety "—safety in dishonour ! Vidula, on the contrary, is an unwomanly woman in the Shavian sense ; she addresses to her unmanly man of a son spirited words, rousing him to action. Death is preferable to slavery ; death on the battlefield is to be preferred to eating one's heart out in the comparative security of one's place of abject retreat. Vidula, woman though she is, is all for blood, toil, tears and sweat ; she will not countenance acquiescence in a visible wrong ; she will banish all softness and timidity and sloth and embrace the blood and iron of heroic warfare ! Neither the

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fearful horrors of war nor the hopeless uncertainty of its ultimate outcome deters her from urging upon Sunjoy the imperative need to give battle to the enemy.

Vidula is thus a scream of passion—radiant, full-throated and inspiring. Sri Aurobindo wields the *Locksley Hall* metre with commendable dexterity and power, and the mother's exhortation to the son acquires in result the topicality and universality of a moving patriotic anthem :

" Son," she cried, " no son of mine to make thy mother's
heart rejoice !
Hark, thy foemen mock and triumph, yet to live is still thy
choice.

Nor thy hero father got thee, nor I bore thee in my womb,
Random changeling from some world of petty souls and
coward gloom !.....

Out to battle, do thy man's work, falter not in high attempt ;
So a man is quit before his God and saved from self-
contempt.....

Sunjoy, Sunjoy, waste not thou thy flame in smoke !
Impetuous, dire,
Leap upon thy foes for havoc as a famished lion leaps,
Storming through thy vanquished victors till thou fall on
slaughtered heaps.....

Shrink not from a noble action, stoop not to unworthy deed !
Vile are they who stoop, they gain not Heaven's doors, nor
here succeed.....

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When thou winnest difficult victory from the clutch of
fearful strife,
I shall know thou art my offspring and shall love my son
indeed."[1]

Sri Aurobindo admits that the style of the original Sanskrit is "terse, brief, packed and allusive, sometimes knotted into a pregnant obscurity by the drastic economy of word and phrase."[2] But the "free poetic paraphrase" conveys an adequate impression of the original, and occasional lines like—

Gathering here an earthly glory, shining there like Indra's
sun...[3]

Lo! we toss in shoreless waters, be the haven to our sail!
Lo! we drown in monstrous billows, be our boat with
kindly hail!..[4]

assume a diamond's edge and glitter. However, it is only when the poem is read aloud at a stretch that it fully brings out Sri Aurobindo's mastery of rhythm and language, which are often seen to be perfectly attuned to Vidula's tempestuous passion and truly torrential speech.

Vidula is no doubt but a page from the *Mahabharata;* and yet, appearing as it did during the hectic days when the *mantra* of Bankim Chandra's

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, pp. 231-2; 233; 234; 241; and 242.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 231.
3. *Ibid.*, II, p. 236.
4. *Ibid.*, II, p. 238.

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Bandemataram was reverberating through the length and breadth of the country, *Vidula* could not help acquiring a tremendous political connotation, quite apart from its value as a poem. Wasn't the Mother both Vidula and the Patroness of Aryasthan ? Wasn't the Son both the slothful Sunjoy and also ever-ageing India who is also for ever young ? Any subject nation in the world might find the poem inspiring. Further, there are passages which, though they were penned in Sanskrit by Vyasa so many centuries ago, seem to refer, not so much to conditions that subsisted some thousands of years ago, but rather to the predicament in the world to-day,—and not only in India but in many other countries in the world :

Now this nation and this army and the statesmen of the land,
All are torn by different counsels and they part to either hand.[1]

Is this General de Gaulle addressing the French people or Dr. Edouard Benes addressing on the air his brother Czechs and Slovaks ? Is it a Marshal Stalin or a Generalissimo Chiang addressing a word of warning and a message of hope to his countrymen, who are yet grovelling in the stifling groove of an alien military occupation ?[2] It is none of these things ; it is almost an " old wives' tale," as old as

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 245.
2. Written in October 1943.

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the *Mahabharata*, and perhaps older still; but its relevance is perennial, and hence *Vidula* will ever move men's hearts more than trumpets or bugle-sounds.

IV

During his stay in Baroda, Sri Aurobindo wrote a number of lyrical poems—about twenty in all—which owe their primary inspiration to his growing familiarity with Vedantic ideas and ideals. The *Upanishads* and the *Gita* had swum into his ken and stimulated in him a spirit of restless philosophical inquiry into the ultimates of life. He now tirelessly pondered over God, Man and Nature, Providence, Foreknowledge and Fate, Rebirth, Evolution and Progress; and as he pondered, as he perceived a particular movement of thought, as he glimpsed in the prevalent obscurity and confusion some inspiring vision, he endeavoured to express his unique thought movements and experiences in terms of verse. Mere wonder has thus given place to a mood of inquiry; now inquiry gives rise to daring speculation and to a dialectic of doubt; and these, again, at last crystallize into a core of Faith. On the merely intellectual plane, the doubts are quite stilled, the crust of agnosticism and European culture lies about in fragments, and lo! Sri Aurobindo has safely come through!

But as yet Sri Aurobindo was grappling with the Ultimate only with the aid of his intellect and im-

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agination; he was, no doubt, groping towards spirituality, but he had not succeeded in making it the ruling principle of his life. Thus these early poems are not, strictly speaking, mystical outpourings; Sri Aurobindo is writing these poems merely from the levels of the Higher Mind or the Illumined Mind; and he is giving us only philosophical generalizations or prints of vividly imagined facets of the Truth. It must be remembered here that "the mental intuitions of the metaphysician or the poet for the most part fall far short of a concrete spiritual experience; they are distant flashes, shadowy reflections, not rays from the centre of Light."[1] But even these are very valuable to us at one stage of our spiritual development and for ever valuable as poetry. As Sri Aurobindo has clinchingly put it, "a philosophic statement about the Atman is a mental formula, not knowledge, not experience; yet sometimes the Divine takes it as a channel of touch; strangely, a barrier in the mind breaks down, something is seen, a profound change operated in some inner part, there enters into the ground of the nature something calm, equal, ineffable....Similar touches can come through art, music, poetry....All things in the Lila can turn into windows that open on the hidden Reality."[2]

Some of these early philosophical poems—*In the*

1. *The Riddle of This World*, p. 47.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-8.

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Moonlight, for instance—are mainly intellectually sustained and but fitfully acquire the piercing accents of poetry. Others like *To the Sea* and *The Vedantin's Prayer*, for all their thought-content and mastery of phrase, do not seem to employ the absolutely appropriate rhythm, divinely appointed as it were for the communication of mystic truths. But even these pieces display a marvellous metrical craftsmanship and a beautiful precision in language. On the other hand, there are poems like *A Child's Imagination*, *Revelation*, and *The Sea at Night* that are poetry first and foremost, and philosophy only afterwards. Finally, a dialogue like *The Rishi* and poems like *Who* and *A Vision of Science* have an Upanishadic, even a Vedic, ring and come to us like whispers and communications from another world, the world of archetypes and superconscient self-luminous Truth.

In these poems, Sri Aurobindo thinks and argues and affirms after the manner of the Vedantin. The Ultimate—Parabrahman—is shadowed forth as Being, Knowledge and Delight:

This was the triune playground that He made
And One there sports awhile. He plucks His flowers
And by His bees is stung; He is dismayed,
Flees from Himself or has His sullen hours.[1]

The Vedantin would gladly clutch at the intangible, —he would gladly scale the heights of Brahma-

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 143.

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knowledge ; but while the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak ; therefore the Vedantin sends forth this prayer to the Supreme :

O lonely Truth !
Nor let the specious gods who ape Thee still
Deceive my youth.
These clamours still ;
For I would hear the eternal voice and know
The eternal Will.....
O hidden door
Of Knowledge, open ! Strength, fulfil thyself !
Love, outpour ![1]

" Distant flashes " presently reach the Vedantin ; his soul sees " lustre in midnight " and beholds " stars born from a thought"[2] ; his soul is verily like a tree " earth-bound, heaven-amorous"[3] ; it can see beyond " a rough glimmering infinity"[4] ; and, by and by, the Vedantin is able to affirm the Everlasting Yea ever so often and in ever so many ways.

Two things are clear to him : *firstly*, that the intellect by itself is but a partial guide, and often an even deceptive guide, in spiritual matters :

The intellect is not all ; a guide within
Awaits our question. He it was informed
The Reason, He surpasses ; and unformed
Presages of His mightiness begin.[5]

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, pp. 136-7.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 124.
3. *Ibid.*, I, p. 128.
4. *Ibid.*, I, p. 135.
5. *Ibid.*, I, p. 168.

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And, *secondly*, it is now clear to him that Death is not really a badge of his limitation, but rather of his freedom :

> Life only is, or death is life disguised,—
> Life a short death until by life we are surprised[1] ;

again :

> He made an eager death and called it life,
> He stung Himself with bliss and called it pain[2] ;

and Death " is but changing of our robes to wait in wedding garments at the Eternal's gate."[3] Tribulations are but trials for testing our capacity for experiencing God ; danger and difficulty, pain and defeat, are only the ghost-creations of the deluded mind. The true Self is above and beyond all the seeming limitations of the world.

In the fullness of his self-vision, the poet can tongue forth the Everlasting Yea in different ways :

> All music is only the sound of His laughter,
> All beauty the smile of His passionate bliss ;
> Our lives are His heart-beats, our rapture the bridal
> Of Radha and Krishna, our love is their kiss.....

> In the sweep of the worlds, in the surge of the ages,
> Ineffable, mighty, majestic and pure,
> Beyond the last pinnacle seized by the thinker
> He is throned in His seats that for ever endure....

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 141.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 143
3. *Ibid.*, I, p. 144.

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It is He in the sun who is ageless and deathless,
And into the midnight His shadow is thrown ;
When darkness was blind and engulfed within darkness,
He was seated within it immense and alone.[1]

The anapæstic measure gives these stanzas—which are taken from the poem entitled, *Who*—an almost Swinburnian rapidity of movement, and hence the revelations come one after another in a blinding cataract. In another poem, *A Vision of Science*, occurs an equally ennobling asseveration :

" For Thou, O Splendour, art myself concealed,
And the grey cell contains me not, the star
I outmeasure and am older than the elements are.
Whether on earth or far beyond the sun,
I, stumbling, clouded, am the Eternal One."[2]

The architectonics of the above passage truly transmute into beautiful poetry even the tremendous energy that informs it.

The Everlasting Yea is thus affirmed in divers tunes by the adept singer ; it is the finale to the Arctic Seer's revelation :

Seek Him upon the earth. For thee He set
In the huge press
Of many worlds to build a mighty state
For man's success,
Who seeks his goal. Perfect thy human might,
Perfect the race.

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 123.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 127.

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For thou art He, O King. Only the night
Is on thy soul
By thy own will. Remove it and recover
The serene whole
Thou art indeed, then raise up man the lover
To God the goal.[1]

The Kingdom of God is *here*,—and He is to be sought and found upon the earth! Man need not always be cribbed by the limitations of death, desire and incapacity. Man can exceed himself and achieve Freedom, Power and Immortality. The Iron Age is already a thing of the past :

Only now
The last fierce spasm of the dying past
Shall shake the nations, and when that has passed,
Earth washed of ills shall raise a fairer brow.[2]

Man will rise "to the good with Titan wings"; he will "build immortally with mortal things"; his whole body will become a living soul, and he will

Extend Heaven's claim upon the toiling earth
And climb from death to a diviner birth
Grasped and supported by immortal Will."[3]

V

The bulk of Sri Aurobindo's poetical output during the Baroda period has now been surveyed in considerable detail. The many translations from

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 162.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 170.
3. *Ibid.*, I, p. 170.

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Bengali and Sanskrit; the various philosophical poems; the metrical romances, *Urvasie* and *Love and Death*, and *Perseus the Deliverer*, in a class apart; and *Baji Prabhou* and *Vidula*, both poems with an underlying patriotic purpose: these were the achievements of less than fifteen years of poetical activity when their author was also simultaneously pursuing the exhausting profession of teaching and, towards the end, the even more exhausting profession of journalism and politics.

What is truly remarkable in these early poems of Sri Aurobindo is their amazingly flawless metrical craftsmanship. A stay of fourteen years in England during the most impressionable period of his life had given Sri Aurobindo an impeccable ear for English sound values; and a prolonged and intimate familiarity with classical languages like Greek, Latin and Sanskrit had facilitated his mastery of regular verse forms. Authentic poet and thinker that he has always been, Sri Aurobindo has known all the time that poetry is not metre merely but only uses it as its fit vehicle for articulation. As he once remarked, "Poetry, if it deserves the name at all, comes always from some subtle plane through the creative vital and uses the outward mind and other external instruments for transmission only."[1] If the inspiration is not urgent enough, or if the metrical craftsmanship is not consummate enough

1. Letter to Amalkiran; quoted in *Anami*, p. 275.

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we have either verse that is pleasing and faultless or poetry that just misses its name and its vocation. As Sri Aurobindo pithily put it, without *bhava*—without the creative vital itself participating in the poetic creation—all metrical melody can only be a "melodious corpse."[1] But whereas the breeze of inspiration bloweth where it listeth and cannot be summoned to order, metrical mastery can generally be acquired and retained. Meanwhile the poet can but wait for the unpredictable moment when inspiration will impinge upon the creative vital and enkindle the mere framework of verse into the unfading incandescence of poetry.

Sri Aurobindo "was born as a poet and he is a born poet"[2]; but even a born poet cannot always write at the top of his form. Poetry should give us, not a system of thought, but the poetry of thought, not philosophy, but the poetry of philosophy. Even during the Baroda period, Sri Aurobindo frequently achieved this feat of transfiguration. The failures are unimportant, the successes alone should demand our attention and compel our admiration. In a poem like *Rebirth*, rhythm and phrase fuse again and again into a reality of poetic communication; *A Child's Imagination*, that effusion of pure melody, embodies at the same time a potent revelation :

1. Letter to Dilip.
2. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, Publisher's Note.

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O thou golden image,
Miniature of bliss....

God remembers in thy bosom
All the wonders that He wrought.[1]

And this other short piece, *The Sea at Night*, is almost perfect; in it also sound and sense cohere into a purposive unity:

The grey sea creeps half-visible, half-hushed,
And grasps with its innumerable hands
These silent walls. I see beyond a rough
Glimmering infinity, I feel the wash
And hear the sibilation of the waves
That whisper to each other as they push
To shoreward side by side,—long lines and dim
Of movement flecked with quivering spots of foam,
The quiet welter of a shifting world.[2]

The longer poems and dramas, however, are not always consistently good as sheer poetry. As Sri Aurobindo himself once wrote, summarizing Futurist views on the question: "Length in a poem is itself a sin, for length means padding.... a long poem is a bad poem.... only brief work, intense, lyrical in spirit, can be throughout pure poetry."[3] On the other hand, Keats has remarked that "a long poem is a test of invention, which I take to be the Pole Star of poetry, as fancy is the sails, and

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 134.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 135.
3. Letter to Dilip.

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imagination the rudder." Even in Milton's, and certainly in Wordsworth's, poetical output, considerable stretches of verse can be discovered which, while they are eloquent or effective otherwise, yet fail to touch the level of pure poetry. This is so in Sri Aurobindo's longer poems as well. Passages of impassioned poetry are met with fairly frequently enough; but passages less charged with poetic emotion also supervene. To say so is by no means to indulge in detraction; it is only to admit the inevitable limitations of "objective" poetry. The writer of an epyllion or of a metrical romance or of a drama can always give us melodious or memorable verse; he can be consistently eloquent and effective; but he cannot consistently transport us with the piercing "sublime" of "pure" poetry.

As a metrical craftsman, Sri Aurobindo is without an equal in Indo-Anglian literature; and not many contemporary practitioners of verse among Englishmen have given proof of the same facility and dexterity in wielding the instrument of blank verse as is evidenced in *Urvasie, Love and Death, The Hero and the Nymph, Perseus the Deliverer* and *Baji Prabhou*. The late Lytton Strachey aptly compared blank verse to the Djinn in the *Arabian Nights;* it is either the most terrible of masters or the most obedient and helpful of slaves; one must know the *mantra* of metrical mastery to be able to awe the Djinn into utter obedience—and there is very little doubt that Sri Aurobindo managed to

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master the *mantra*, and hence the Djinn, quiet early in his life. Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, they all knew the secret, and they all could breathe into the seeming irregularity of blank verse the norm of iambic rhythm, that permitted a thousand and one fluctuations and yet challengingly remained itself. This Sri Aurobindo also could do—and, even during the Baroda period, he did it again and again, astonishing and satisfying us at the same time. The shifting cæsuras, the unexpected substitutions, the sheer weight of occasional polysyllables, the startling inversions, the stinging wrenched accents, the sense often triumphantly overwhelming and overflowing the metrical pauses, these and other "tricks of the trade" make many a blank verse passage in Sri Aurobindo's poems and plays partake of the character of a bewilderingly beautiful symphony. The agonized heart of an Andromeda or a Pururavas or a Ruru finds in blank verse a splendid medium for self-expression; the vaunts and demonic imaginings of Polydaon, the outspoken utterances and curses of Cassiopea, the sweet-sad virgin ecstasies of Urvasie, the exultations and jealousies and distractions of lovers, all, all are conveyed by Sri Aurobindo through blank verse rhythms, possessing almost always the qualities of flexibility, charm and vitality.

At times, however, Sri Aurobindo's muse throws out gem-like single lines that one might treasure

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long in one's memory :

> O iron-throated vast unpitying sea.....[1]
>
> Titanic on the old stupendous hills.....[2]
>
> Bridal outpantings of her broken name. ..[3]

Such lines sing themselves out in the chambers of the subconscious long after the poem itself has been read and all but forgotten. More rarely, one comes across a blank verse paragraph whose architectonics imprint themselves in the fabric of one's memory for ever and for ever. Many such significant streams of ordered and purposeful sound have already been quoted in the previous chapters and they all confidently proclaim Sri Aurobindo to be an accomplished and an outstanding English poet. Here are only names—four almost unpronounceable names :

> Python and Naga monstrous, Joruthcaru,
> Tuxuc and Vasuki himself, immense,
> Magic Carcotaca all flecked with fire ;[4]

but it is no mere catalogue of the names of non-existing pythons and snakes. Sri Aurobindo has waved his wand, invoked the *mantra* of blank verse, and turned mere names into the magic of imperishable poetry. In his passion and in his scholarship,

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 273.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 53.
3. *Ibid.*, I, p. 95.
4. *Ibid.*, I, p. 109.

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in his classicisms and in his inversions, in his austerity and in his sublimity, in his organ-voiced puissance and in his inspiring solitariness, Sri Aurobindo is the most Miltonic of the Indo-Anglian poets ; and yet, Miltonic as he is, he never ceases to be Sri Aurobindo also,—and that is the measure of his distinction as a great English poet.

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Part II

PATRIOT AND PROPHET

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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PLUNGE INTO POLITICS

I

We have seen that Sri Aurobindo's *Urvasie, Love and Death* and *Perseus the Deliverer* are not only poems, and very good as poems, but that they are also poems with a purpose. How shall man conduct himself on what seems to be no better than—or nothing else than—" life's scaffold "? Love is not enough ; the selfish way is a thing that perverts the cosmic aim and often even leaves a distaste behind. Man must, therefore, rather learn to serve others, not solely serve himself ; he must acquire the fortitude to be able to sacrifice his very life, should it become necessary, at the altar of a noble cause. Pururavas failed ; Ruru failed ; they failed India, they let down a high and pure ideal in preference to a selfish one. There was, no doubt, a touch of greatness in them both,—they were willing to give up everything for the sake of an Urvasie or of a Priyumvada,—but they were not great enough !

In *Perseus the Deliverer*, on the other hand, Sri Aurobindo tried to interpret the idea of progress in his own way. The Divine and Asuric forces are ever struggling for mastery ; the Divine forces

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work through certain willing instruments, the Asuric through others ; but the Divine must always ultimately triumph over the Asuric, and thus progress is an assured thing. The cosmic struggle between the Divine and the Asuric forces is particularized, now with greater now with lesser intensity, in individual human conflicts or more wide-spread conflicts between whole nations and peoples. When thus giant forces join issue, people pin their faith in a Messiah, an Avatar, a divine-human personality ; Perseus is presented as such a personality ; he is, as it were, " the divine Seer-Will descending upon the human consciousness to reveal to it the divine meaning behind our half-blind action and to give along with the vision the exalted will that is faithful and performs and the ideal force that executes according to the vision."[1] And yet, transcending both the individual and cosmic conflicts, Reality is for ever the same. Both the horror of the conflict and the peaceful close of its periodical resolution are part and parcel of the unescapable law of Becoming ; in other words, " world-existence is the ecstatic dance of Shiva which multiplies the body of the God numberlessly to the view : it leaves that white existence precisely where and what it was, ever is and ever will be ; its sole absolute object is the joy of the dancing."[2]

1. Sri Aurobindo, *Ideal and Progress*, p. 15.
2. *The Life Divine*, I, p. 119.

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It is clear from the above that Sri Aurobindo was preoccupied, even when he was but a conscientious Professor of English or an accomplished poet and dramatist, with *other* things—with the problem of service and sacrifice and of right aspiration and conduct. From the very first, the idea of personal salvation or of individual felicity did not seem to Sri Aurobindo anything like a supreme aim, worth being pursued for its own sake ; a solitary salvation leaving the world to its fate was almost distasteful to him. No doubt, he would read and he would think and he would write poetry, he would plan and he would work and he would achieve,—but on whose behalf ? Not for his own sake—he was very sure about that ; for whose sake, then ?[1]

For a time it appeared to him that his duty lay in trying to wake up his countrymen—especially his own brothers and sisters of Bengal—from their all too humiliating stupor. An alien rule had brought in its equipage an entirely new set of values which had become the ruling ideas of the Indian intelligentsia. Not merely Bengal, but the whole of India, " was once drunk with the wine of European Civilization, and with the purely intellectual teaching that it received from the West. It

1. Compare what Sri Aurobindo wrote in 1921 : " The yoga we practise, is not for ourselves alone, but for humanity. Its object is not personal *mukti*.....but the liberation of the human race." (*The Yoga and its Objects*, p. 5).

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began to see all things, to judge all things, through the imperfect instrumentality of the intellect. When it was so, Bengal (and the rest of India also, let us add) became atheistic, it became a land of doubters and cynics."[1] The newly-educated Indian—especially if he happened to be, in addition, an " England-returned " gentleman—became a ridiculous perversion of his European contemporary; as Professor Radhakrishnan has pointed out, " his voice became an echo, his life a quotation, his soul a brain, and his free spirit a slave to things." Deformed though such people were, they would not admit the fact; rather, as with the followers of Comus,

> so perfect is their misery,
> Not once perceive their foul disfigurement,
> And boast themselves more comely than before.[2]

Sri Aurobindo revolved these things in his mind and deplored the apathy, the selfishness and the cynicism that seemed to have so completely annexed the body and the soul of the average educated Indian. Sri Aurobindo had decided, even when he was in England, to devote his life to the service of his motherland and the task of achieving her liberation from bondage. He began (as we saw in an earlier Chapter), soon after his return to India, to write anonymously on political matters to the

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 15.
2. Milton, *Comus*, ll. 73-5.

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popular press, trying to awaken the nation to the ideas of the future. But these articles were not well received by the leaders of the Nineties ; Sri Aurobindo was persuaded to desist from publishing further articles in the same strain, and hence he drew back into silence. But not for a second did he abandon his ideas or his hope of an effective action in the political sphere.

Years passed, and the question—the overwhelming question—returned periodically, demanding an answer every time : Could not something be done ? Could not Sri Aurobindo find an opportunity for service in the larger life of Bengal,—of the Indian nation itself ? He knew well enough that he was ready for making whatever sacrifices might be called for in the interests of the Mother. As he wrote some years later : " A man capable of self-sacrifice, whatever his other sins, has left the animal behind him ; he has the stuff in him of a future and higher humanity."[1] Not in pride, but simply as an item of self-knowledge, Sri Aurobindo knew quite well of his own individual capacity for self-sacrifice.

But that was not enough : other parties had to be considered, the preparedness or otherwise of the country also had to be weighed in the balance without a tinge of self-deception. Sri Aurobindo knew that " a nation capable of a national act of

1. *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*, p. 47.

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self-sacrifice ensures its future "[1]; but—this was the important question—was the Indian nation as yet capable of such a national act of self-sacrifice ?

Sri Aurobindo weighed, and considered, and began a work that was still nameless ; in the course of the work he got into touch with men that counted, with groups that counted ; he went to Bengal " to see what was the hope of revival, what was the political condition of the people, and whether there was the possibility of a real movement "[2]; what he found there was " that the prevailing mood was apathy and despair."[3] The moment for public work had not come ; he decided—this was soon after the turn of the present century—to return to Baroda and to continue his political work behind the scenes in silence.

II

It must be clear from the foregoing account that at least since 1902—if not even earlier—Sri Aurobindo had wished to enter the political fray and contribute his mite to the forces that were seriously working for the country's redemption and rehabilitation. He had already joined, with some of the more advanced leaders, to organize bodies for

1. *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*, p. 47.
2. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 26.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

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political action, which would act when the time for it came; but as yet he could do little *in public*. The Programme of the secret organization was at first swaraj, boycott, and swadeshi,—swaraj meaning to Sri Aurobindo, not an attenuated form of colonial self-government, but complete independence.[1]

Meanwhile the "mendicant" policy of the "moderates" continued as the official policy of the Indian National Congress; the political pulse of the nation was below par; his own province of Bengal —anything but intrepid at the time—was in no mood to be persuaded by Sri Aurobindo and his gospel of virile nationalism. He decided therefore to ply the pedagogic furrow for yet a while longer, till Bengal and the country as a whole should be willing and ready to receive and translate into action his militant nationalist programme.

It was now that the nationalist party received help from a most unexpected quarter,—Lord Curzon, the Governor-General. Not only did he, by making a fetish of bureaucratic efficiency, progres-

1. The word *swaraj* was first used by the Bengali-Maratha publicist, Mr. Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar, author of *Desher Katha*, a book giving all the details of India's economic servitude, which had an enormous influence on the young men of Bengal and helped to turn them into revolutionaries. The word was taken up as their ideal by the revolutionary party and popularized by the vernacular paper, *Sandhya*, edited by Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya; it was caught hold of by Dadabhai Naoroji at the Calcutta Congress as the equivalent of colonial self-government, but did not long retain that depreciated value. It was Sri Aurobindo who first used its English equivalent, "independence," and reiterated it constantly in the *Bandemataram* as the one and immediate aim of national politics.

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sively irritate the sober sections of Indian opinion ; not only did he, with his indiscreet and insolent orations, exasperate and enrage national self-respect ; but he truly surpassed even himself by planning what was to prove the culminating act of his political unwisdom, the " partition of Bengal." The people of Bengal threw off the cloak of political lethargy and wished to assert their self-respect, their birth-right to live and die as *one* people. And not Bengal only, but the whole of nationalist India was agitated over the " partition " question.

And what were Sri Aurobindo's thoughts during the crisis ? These were vividly—almost with prophetic and poetic fervour and intensity—expressed in the course of a letter that Sri Aurobindo wrote to his wife from Baroda towards the end of August 1905.[1] He asked his wife to remember that she is married to a peculiar, an extraordinary, man : he might be called even a mad man. But when a " mad " person achieves the thing his mind is set on, he is acclaimed by the world a " great " man. Sri Aurobindo himself had not yet achieved his aim, he had not even seriously and regularly thrown himself into his work. But the day was not far off

1. This and two other letters, written originally in Bengali, were seized by the police during house-search and produced later in court. No authorized English rendering of these letters is available. Sri Sisirkumar Mitra kindly explained them to me sentence by sentence ; my summaries are based upon the notes I took on the occasion. I have also made use of the Tamil versions given by Swami Shuddhananda Bharatiar and Mr. P. Kodandaraman in their books on Sri Aurobindo.

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when he would do so; and would his wife then stand by his side, truly a *sahadharmini*, verily her husband's *shakti*?

Sri Aurobindo proceeded to inform his wife that he was in the grip of three mighty convictions—mad ideas, the world will call them,—three supreme frenzies. Firstly, Sri Aurobindo firmly believed that all his possessions were his only on trust—they were really God's; out of his earnings he could keep for himself only a bare minimum, the rest was to be spent on *dharmakarya*. So far he had returned to God only two annas in the rupee; he had rendered Him only such imperfect accounts! It was very easy to give money to his wife or to his sister, Srimati Sarojini Devi; Sri Aurobindo felt that it was his duty to look upon *all* the thirty crores of Indians as his own brothers and sisters; it was his duty—it was the condition under which he had received money from God—to do all that lay in his power to relieve the phenomenal misery of the people of his country.

Secondly, Sri Aurobindo desired with his whole heart to *see* God—see Him face to face—however difficult the journey and however long the way. If God exists—and He does!—there *must* be a means of confronting Him *tète-à-tète*, experiencing Him; the Hindu scriptures say that God too can be seen, and prescribe certain *vidhis* for the attainment of that end. From personal experience—limited though it was—Sri Aurobindo could assure his

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wife that there is abiding truth in what the Hindu scriptures say. Would she, his wife, would she also keep abreast of him—come behind him, if she cannot come alongside of him—on his God-ward journey ?

Thirdly, Sri Aurobindo looked upon his country, not as a Geographical entity spotted with hills and lined with rivers and shaded with plains, but as the Mother.[1] He saw always the spiritual reality behind the material body of the Mother. A demon was sucking the Mother's life-blood and he, Sri Aurobindo, knew that he had the power to redeem Her from the demon's grasp ; and he would do it, not by means of *kshatratej*, but by virtue of his *brahmatej*.[2] It was a *mahavrata* Sri Aurobindo was determined to carry on to a successful conclusion. Nor was all that a passing whim. It was with this in his bones that God had sent him to the world. The seed had started to sprout at the age of fourteen ; it had become steady and firm at the age of eighteen. Would she, she his own wife, would she stand by his side and be a source of encouragement and

1. In 1933, in reply to Nirodbaran's query whether the expression Mother applied to India was the utter truth or only a poetic or patriotic sentiment, Sri Aurobindo wrote in reply : " My dear sir, I am not a materialist. If I had seen India as only a geographical area with a number of more or less interesting or uninteresting people in it, I would hardly have gone out of my way to do all that for the said area."

2. Referring to this passage, C. R. Das said during the Alipur case : " Here is a man who regards it as a part of his ideal of religion to bring about the salvation of his country, and that by applying *brahmatej*."

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strength to him? Giving up all fear, putting her trust in God in a mood of absolute self-surrender, she, she an apparently weak woman, even she can dare and achieve much! Together they could then start fulfilling God's aims!

III

Presently, Curzon's act of vandalism—the Partition of Bengal—became law on the 29th September 1905. Immediately Bengal as one man decided to give battle to the bureaucracy till the Act was annulled. The sixteenth of October was observed by the people of the two cleft portions of Bengal as a day of mourning and fasting and resolution. British cloth in huge piles was symbolically set fire to; hundreds of young men left their schools and colleges in protest against the mad policy of the Government; in crowded meetings the "National Proclamation" was lustily passed and the "Swadeshi Vow" was administered with an almost religious fervour. In all these ways the Lieutenant-Governors of the two broken provinces were disagreeably made to realize that the whole people were truly up against the new dispensation.

In the meantime, the biter had himself been bit, the bumptious and brilliant Governor-General had been worsted in his encounter with the Commander-in-Chief, and so Lord Curzon left India, leaving his antagonist, General Kitchener, in full possession of the field. Lord Minto now came to

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India as the new Governor-General. With John Morley—of *On Compromise* fame—for Secretary of State and Lord Minto as Governor-General, there was perhaps some chance that the ill-omened Curzonian policy might be reversed. But considerations of prestige were unhappily involved and the country was fated to go through a period of distress, frustration, violence and distraction.

For some years previously, a small but articulate section within the Congress was demanding bolder programmes and a more militant gospel for the purpose of mobilizing all the forces of the country on the central issue of the national demand. The Bombay Congress of 1904 recognized the existence of these "Extremists"; the Benares Congress of 1905 found in the "Extremists" a warning and a portent; the Calcutta Congress of 1906 witnessed the ocular Extremist protest in the shape of a "walk out." The pulse of the nation was no more cucumber-cold; it was getting more and more feverish, and even the Moderates were not quite proof against the infection:

> "Moderates and Extremists alike and with equal emphasis protested against the attitude of Government and with equal firmness deprecated an ignominious begging spirit and urged the people to take their stand more upon justice than upon generosity and upon their own rights more than upon concessions of Government."[1]

1. Ambika Charan Mazumdar, *Indian National Evolution*, pp. 111-2.

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And the aged Dadabhai Naoroji, the President of the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress, ensured the success of the gathering by the sheer weight of his personality.

Sri Aurobindo was present at the Congress in 1904, and again in 1906, and took an important part in the counsels of the Extremist party and in the formulation of its four-fold programme. After a severe tussle behind the scenes, this programme was accepted by the Moderates also, and at last four momentous resolutions—on self-government, national education, swadeshi and the boycott of foreign goods, respectively—were passed by the assembled delegates. The resolutions certainly bore, to quote the Moderate leader, Mr. Ambika Charan Mazumdar, "unmistakable evidence of the spirit of the times."[1]

Earlier in the year, in March 1906, Sri Aurobindo had witnessed in Barisal and in other parts of Bengal both the revolutionary fervour of the people and the repressive actions of the Government. He returned to Baroda, but in July he left again, taking indefinite leave without pay. For all practical purposes, he left the Baroda service for good; he gave no thought to its settled salary and its seductive prospects; the Mother had called him indeed,—he would go! Was he taking a blind leap into the Unknown?—he did not know, and he did not care; and he did not hesitate either. Here was work for

1. Ambika Charan Mazumdar, *Indian National Evolution*, p. 112.

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him, here was a God-given opportunity to serve the Mother and to realize his own potentialities for unselfish service ; nothing else mattered !

Soon after his arrival in Calcutta, Sri Aurobindo took a hand in the direction of the Nationalist party. Bepin Chandra Pal had just then started a daily paper, *The Bandemataram*, with only five hundred rupees in his pocket. Sri Aurobindo took up the joint editorship of the paper, edited the paper during Bepin Pal's absence, and induced the Nationalist party to take it up as its organ and finance it. Since he had not yet formally severed his connection with the Baroda College, he did not take up, officially and publicly, the editorship of the *Bandemataram*, although after Bepin Pal left that post Sri Aurobindo was practically in full control of the paper.

Besides, he quickly infused into the scattered cliques of dissident Congressmen something of his own fiery idealism and uncompromising nationalism ; he called a meeting of the leaders of the Nationalist party at which it was decided, at his instance, to give up the " behind the scenes jostlings " with the Moderates, and declare an open war on Moderatism and place before the country what was practically a revolutionary programme. For the time being, and seemingly all of a sudden, Sri Aurobindo thus became " the flaming apostle of the extreme Nationalists."[1]

1. P. C. Ray, *Life and Times of C. R. Das*, p. 25.

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In the course of the "Partition of Bengal" agitation, many students had left the colleges affiliated to the University of Calcutta, and something had to be done with them and for them. The Bengal National College was accordingly founded, and Sri Aurobindo became its first Principal in August 1906 on a monthly salary of Rs. 150, exactly one fifth of the salary he had been drawing in Baroda. Presently, however, he left the organization of the college to the educationist, Satish Mukherjee, and plunged fully into politics. During the next few months, Sri Aurobindo was in indifferent health ; he took leave from the National College again and again, and spent four or five months, between December 1906 and April 1907, at Deoghar, with the exception of about ten days in December-January for Congress meetings in Calcutta.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

BANDEMATARAM

I

Besides Sri Aurobindo, there were also other fiery propagators of the new gospel of Nationalism —notably, Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya and Sri Aurobindo's younger brother, Barindra Kumar Ghose. Other leaders, Bepin Chandra Pal and Chittaranjan Das, Rabindranath Tagore and Aswini Kumar Dutt, these and many others, were in one way or other associated with the new movement, which aimed, not merely at the annulment of the partition, but also at national emancipation. The novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (and especially *Anandamath*, containing the now celebrated song, *Bandemataram*) and the dramas of Dwijendralal Roy, the songs of Rabindranath Tagore and Sarala-devi Chowdhurani, even hoary Hindu epics and Puranas, all contributed in very large measure to the national awakening.

In particular, the song *Bandemataram* leaped out of its comparative obscurity within the covers of a Bengali novel and in one sweep found itself on the lips of every Indian, man or woman or child.

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SRI AUROBINDO IN CALCUTTA

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To quote Sri Aurobindo :

> " The *mantra* had been given and in a single day a whole people had been converted to the religion of patriotism. The Mother had revealed herself. Once that vision has come to a people, there can be no rest, no peace, no further slumber till the temple has been made ready, the image installed and the sacrifice offered. A great nation which has had that vision can never again bend its neck in subjection to the yoke of a conqueror."[1]

Sri Aurobindo has given us inspiring English renderings of both *Bandemataram* and Dwijendralal Roy's *Mother India*. Bankim Chandra's magical incantation is untranslatable into verse in another language " owing to its unique union of sweetness, simple directness and high poetic force."[2] But Sri Aurobindo's poetic version is nevertheless charged with a high potential of force and suggestiveness :

> Thou art wisdom, thou art law,
> Thou our heart, our soul, our breath,
> Thou the love divine, the awe
> In our hearts that conquers death.
> Thine the strength that nerves the arm,
> Thine the beauty, thine the charm.....
> Rich with thy hurrying streams,
> Bright with thy orchard gleams,
> Dark of hue, O candid-fair
> In thy soul, with jewelled hair

1. *Bankim-Tilak-Dayananda*, p. 14.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 5, Footnote.

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And thy glorious smile divine,
Loveliest of all earthly lands,
Showering wealth from well-stored hands![1]

The Mother is Durga, Lady and Queen, and she is Lakshmi, "lotus-throned," and the Muse "a hundred-toned"; she is full beautiful, hers is the "glory of moonlit dreams"; to her we bow, her feet we devoutly kiss!

Dwijendralal Roy's song is almost as inspiring, and something of its beauty and force can be inferred even from Sri Aurobindo's English version:

India, my India, where first human eyes awoke to heavenly light,
All Asia's holy place of pilgrimage, great Motherland of might!
World-mother, first giver to humankind of philosophy and sacred lore,
Knowledge thou gav'st to man, God-love, works, art, religion's opened door....
Art thou not she, that India, where the Aryan Rishis chanted high
The Veda's deep and dateless hymns and are we not their progeny?
Armed with that great tradition we shall walk the earth with heads unbowed:
O Mother, those who bear that glorious past may well be brave and proud....

1. *Bankim-Tilak-Dayananda*, pp. 3-5; also *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, pp. 227-8; Sri Aurobindo published besides a vigorous "line by line" prose rendering, in the *Karmayogin* of 20th November 1909, and it is reprinted in *Bankim-Tilak-Dayananda*, on pp. 5-6.

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India, my India, who dare call thee a thing for pity's grace
today ?
Mother of wisdom, worship, works, nurse of the spirit's
inward ray ! [1]

It was in India that Lord Krishna sang the Song of Songs ; it was upon India's dust that Gouranga " danced and drank God-love's mysterious wine "; it was India that witnessed the deathless sun of the Buddha's compassion and heard the stern Advaitic gospel of the great Sankara. What if all that grandeur be now " dwarfed or turned to bitter loss and maim " ? We have not forgotten yet " the ideal of those splendid days of gold "; and the " new world of our vision " shall surely rise indeed and give back to us our lost heritage !

No wonder Bengali youths and young women responded pleasurably to these stirring national songs and no wonder India herself thought that she was indeed being borne to the haven of emancipation on the music of Rishi Bankim's *Bandemataram.* It was, thus, the *mantra* of *Bandemataram* and the leap into revolutionary action that changed the people of the province of Bengal, and even of the whole country, teaching them the virtues of selflessness, militancy and virility, and the ineradicable feeling of adoration for the Mother.

1. *Collected Poems and Plays,* II, pp. 309-10.

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II

Sri Aurobindo was now in Calcutta; he was at this time comparatively little known outside his own circle of Nationalists and co-workers, but he was, in fact, the power behind the *Bandemataram* and the brain of the Nationalist party in Bengal. His editorial and other contributions—many of them unsigned—to the *Bandemataram* were the admiration of the people and the despair of the Anglo-Indian press. In an inconceivably short time, *The Bandemataram* became the spearhead of the Nationalist movement in Bengal. " The hand of the master was in it from the very beginning. Its bold attitude, its vigorous thinking, its clear ideas, its chaste and powerful diction, its searching sarcasm and refined witticism were unsurpassed by any journal in the country, either Indian or Anglo-Indian "; and this was how, within a few months, " from the tutor of a few youths " Sri Aurobindo became " the teacher of a whole nation."[1]

Begun as a daily on the 6th August 1906, *The Bandemataram* became more and more popular in the coming months; its proprietors were therefore encouraged to bring out also a weekly edition of the paper from June 2, 1907. It was now possible for people all over India to get the quintessence of *The Bandemataram* in the weekly edition; and hence

1. From an article in *Svaraj*, reproduced in *The Karmayogin* in 1909.

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the vogue of the paper but increased with time, to the no small chagrin of the Government and the Anglo-Indian press.

It is beyond the scope of this study to consider in detail Sri Aurobindo's innumerable contributions to the columns of the *Bandemataram*. We can only refer to a few significant ones,—but even so the choice is not easy ; for, as one examines the old files of the paper, one lights upon so many brilliant and forceful editorial contributions that one is dazzled by their sheer weight and solid and shining structure of argument. Sri Aurobindo speaks often in prophetic accents and he is weighty and solemn and sweetly persuasive on those occasions ; at other times, he is just a superlatively clever controversialist and then one witnesses a true clash of arms, one watches with amusement (and pity) the cumbrous antagonist writhing in the nimble grasp of Sri Aurobindo. There are other occasions still when Sri Aurobindo is the tribune of the Indian people and through him the disarmed and emasculated millions speak with defiance and pride to the civilized world in the strength of their new-found self-confidence and hope. The Prophet of Renascent India, the Tribune of the People, the Quartermaster-General of the Nationalists,—these are the divers powers and personalities of Sri Aurobindo that we glimpse in the *Bandemataram* contributions ; but even these are only partial manifestations and emanations of the central Power and Personality

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whose utter essence we ever vainly try to comprehend !

Some of Sri Aurobindo's political contributions discuss the proposals for constitutional reform outlined by Morley about the middle of 1907. *The Bandemataram* editorially called these reforms "Comic Opera" reforms and acidly pointed out that "the right place for this truly comic Council of Notables with its yet more comic functions is an opera by Gilbert and Sullivan and not an India seething with discontent and convulsed by the throes of an incipient revolution."[1] In a later editorial, entitled "Biparita Buddhi," the *Bandemataram* returned to the attack :

> "The atmosphere of the India House, the debasing responsibility of office, the intoxication of power, has brought the Jingo and killed the man.....The Biparita Buddhi that helps the regeneration of weak and oppressed peoples is manifestly at work. We welcome it and pray for its complete ascendency for sometime in Mr. Morley and other British statesmen."[2]

Some of these editorial articles and other snappy items like satiric compositions and parodies were the work of Shyamsundar Chakravarti, not of Sri Aurobindo. Shyamsundar was a witty parodist and could write with much humour as also with a

1. *The Bandemataram* (References are to the Weekly Edition), June 9, 1907.
2. *Ibid.*, June 30, 1907.

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telling rhetoric; he had besides caught up some imitation of Sri Aurobindo's prose style and many could not distinguish between their writings. Whenever Sri Aurobindo was away from Calcutta, it was Shyamsundar who wrote most of the editorials for the *Bandemataram*, those excepted which were sent by Sri Aurobindo from Deoghar. One of Shyamsundar's successful skits was the "mock-petition" to "Honest John," a piece of vigorous and stinging satire which was printed in the inaugural issue of the Weekly Edition of the *Bandemataram*; when it was later reprinted in the *Glasgow News*, it created quite a stir in Britain, a stir which had its official repercussions in India.

As a politician it was part of Sri Aurobindo's principles never to appeal to the British people; and the *Bandemataram* also avoided such a mendicant policy. But the paper certainly tried to awaken the Indian nation from its slumber. Sri Aurobindo's *Vidula*—to which reference has already been made in an earlier chapter—appeared in the second issue of the *Bandemataram* Weekly, which also contained Shyamsundar's "Unreported Conversation" in verse between a Briton and Ajit Singh on the eve of the latter's arrest. Another inspiring item in the issue was "Pagri Samalo, Jata," a free rendering by Shyamsundar of the poem that used to be sung by the Jats to rouse their countrymen to protest against the imposition of severe taxes. *Perseus the Deliverer*, Sri Aurobindo's great poetic play, began as a serial

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in the issue of June 30, 1907; we have already considered it as poetry and drama, but the readers of the *Bandemataram* must have rather seized the significance of the words, *the Deliverer*. In the issue of July 7, again, the *Bandemataram* merely printed Wilfrid Blunt's poem, "Wind and the Whirlwind," and left it by itself to speak in defence of Indian nationalism. In the next issue of the weekly edition, Shyamsundar transfers, by sleight of hand, the "Trial Scene" in *The Merchant of Venice* to a Calcutta Police Court. The Editor of the *Yugantar*, the Bengali newspaper, is Antonio; and the denizens of Law and Order constitute Shylock. It is all in Shakespeare; but the derogation is directed against the repressive policy of the Government.

A week later the satirical poet turns his attention to the place-seekers and title-hunters who weaken the Nationalist case. "A Hymn to the Supreme Bull" is supposedly the *mantra* of these people, who raise their hands in prayer to the Supreme Bull and scream the while:

> Hail, sempiternal Lord! Be bounteous still
> To give us only titles and posts, and if sedition
> Hath gathered aught of evil, or concealed,
> Disperse it, as your police disperse our crowds.[1]

If satire could hit the bull's eye with such deadly accuracy,—why, the paper in which such bits

1. *The Bandemataram*, July 21, 1907.

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appeared had every reason to feel proud of its growing influence in the country. *The Bandemataram* was therefore fully justified in writing on the occasion of its first anniversary :

> " It (the paper) came into being in answer to an imperative public need and not to satisfy any private ambition or personal whim ; it was born in a great and critical hour for the whole nation and has a message to deliver, which nothing on earth can prevent it from delivering..... It claims that it has given expression to the will of the people and sketched their ideals and aspirations with the greatest amount of fidelity."[1]

III

The growing popularity of the *Bandemataram* was, naturally enough, an eyesore to the Government, to the Anglo-Indian press and to the ultra-moderate elements in the country. And yet it was no easy matter to check the triumphant career of the paper. The editor of the *Statesman* bitterly complained that the editorial articles of the *Bandemataram* were too diabolically clever, crammed full of sedition between the lines, but legally unassailable because of the sheer skill of the language. The Government too must have shared this view,

1. *The Bandemataram*, August 11, 1907.

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for they never ventured to prosecute the paper for its editorial or other articles, whether from Sri Aurobindo's or from the pen of his three editorial colleagues. There was also this important consideration, which too might have influenced the prudent decision of the Government,—that Sri Aurobindo never based his case for freedom on racial hatred or charges of tyranny or misgovernment. His stand was simply this: even good government could not take the place of national government, in other words, independence.

If only the Government had left the *Bandemataram* alone! But the *Biparita Buddhi* walked into the Council chamber and lo! the Government decided to prosecute the *Bandemataram*, not indeed on account of any of its editorial articles, but for having reproduced in it translations of articles included in the *Yugantar* case but not actually used by the prosecution. About the middle of August 1907, information was brought to Sri Aurobindo that a warrant had been issued for his arrest for having published the *Yugantar* articles and also for having edited and published a "Letter to the Editor" entitled "Politics for Indians" in the Dak edition of the *Bandemataram* of July 28. Sri Aurobindo went at once to the Detective Police Office for surrendering himself. From there he was taken to Poddopukur Thana, but was soon released on bail. Two gentlemen, Prof. Girish Bose of Bangabasi College and Mr. Nirod Mullick

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of Wellington Square, stood surety for Sri Aurobindo.[1]

Previous to the launching of the prosecution against him, Sri Aurobindo had confined himself to writing and leadership behind the scenes, not caring to advertise himself or put forward his personality. As he wrote to Dilip two or three decades later: "I was never ardent about fame even in my political days; I preferred to remain behind the curtain, push people without their knowing it, and get things done.... If and so far as publicity serves the Truth, I am quite ready to tolerate it; but I do not find publicity for its own sake desirable." The prosecution, however, put an end to Sri Aurobindo's behind-the-scenes leadership. His name was in the twinkling of a second on the lips of a whole people. The mystery of the authorship of the series of severely, challengingly and tantalizingly beautiful and brilliant *Bandemataram* articles was cleared at last. Appreciations, congratulations, exhortations, all sought Sri Aurobindo from the four corners of the sub-continent. *The Madras Standard* editorially wrote as follows:

> "Perhaps, few outside Bengal have heard of Mr. Aurobindo Ghose, so much so that even the London *Times* has persisted in saying that none but Mr. Bepin Chandra Pal could be the author of the able articles appearing in the *Bandemataram*.....In the history of press prosecu-

1. *The Bandemataram*, August 18, 1907.

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tions in this country, we have not come across a man who has been more conspicuous by reason of his ability and force of character."

The Indian Patriot wrote :

" Mr. Aurobindo Ghose is no notoriety hunter, is no demagogue who wants to become prominent by courting conviction for sedition. A man of very fine culture, his is a lovable nature ; merry, sparkling with wit and humour, ready in refined repartee, he is one of those men to be in whose company is a joy and behind whose exterior is a steadily growing fire of unseen devotion to a cause."

And the *Mahratta* of Poona succinctly declared : " Who knows but what is sedition today may be divine truth tomorrow ? Mr. Aurobindo Ghose is a sweet soul !"

Likewise, messages poured upon Sri Aurobindo. The late Rabindranath Tagore indited a poetic appreciation in Bengali, beginning with the well-known words, " Aurobindo, accept the salutation from Rabindranath !"[1] The students of the Baroda College—Sri Aurobindo's own students of but yesterday—sent this message : " We the students, past and present, of the Baroda College, in a meeting assembled, convey our warmest sympathy to our

1. This was published in the *Bandemataram* of September 8, 1907. An English rendering of the poem appears in the *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Third Annual*, pp. 1-2.

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late Vice-Principal Mr. Ghose in his present trouble." And a contributor to the *Indian Patriot*, who signed himself "A.S.M.," asseverated in the course of his eulogy: "Slaves of ease and security, the butterflies of the hour look small and pitiable by his side."

Meanwhile, Sri Aurobindo had resigned his Principalship of the Calcutta National College, so as not to embarrass the authorities of the College during the time of his prosecution. He was doubtless the idol of his students and when his prosecution and his consequent resignation of the Principalship came to their knowledge, they organized a meeting of the students and teachers of the College to record their regret at the resignation and their sympathy with Sri Aurobindo in his troubles. On that occasion, Sri Aurobindo was invited to speak and, in the course of his moving speech, he remarked:

> "I take it that whatever respect you have shown to me to-day was shown not to me, not merely even to the Principal, but to your country, to the Mother in me, because what little I have done has been done for her, and the slight suffering that I am going to endure will be endured for her sake.....When we established this college, and left other occupations, other chances of life, to devote our lives to this institution, we did so because we hoped to see in it the foundation, the nucleus of a nation, of the new India which

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> is to begin its career after this night of sorrow and trouble, on that day of glory and greatness when India will work for the world. What we want here is not merely to give you a little information, not merely to open to you careers for earning a livelihood, but to build up sons for the motherland to work and to suffer for her..... There are times in a nation's history when Providence places before it one work, one aim, to which everything else, however high and noble in itself, has to be sacrificed. Such a time has now arrived for our motherland when nothing is dearer than her service, when everything else is to be directed to that end. If you will study, study for her sake; train yourself body and mind and soul for her service.....Work that she may prosper. Suffer that she may rejoice. All is contained in that one single advice."[1]

Noble words! And Sri Aurobindo, unlike many mere politicians, really meant what he said. Work, plan, read, aspire, exult, suffer,—but all for the sake of your country, for the Mother's sake; chant the *mantra* of *Bandemataram* and plunge into a career of unselfish service; if your heart is pure and if you have no personal axes to grind, yours will be the strength of ten, nay of a hundred thousand! Onward to victory, then! Victory to the Mother!

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, pp. 3-7.

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IV

The prosecution against Sri Aurobindo pursued a strange career. The whole case hinged upon this question : *who* was the editor of the *Bandemataram* ? No name used to appear in the paper itself ; in December 1906, Sri Aurobindo's name had on a solitary occasion been printed as the editor, but the name had at once been withdrawn since he would not consent to be the *de jure* editor of the paper. Bepin Pal was summoned to give evidence on this question ; and when he refused to be a party to an unjust proceeding, he was sentenced to six months' imprisonment. He went gladly to jail and the prosecution was in a worse quandary than ever !

Indeed, the Government had made a laughing-stock of themselves by launching the prosecution. As the *Punjabee* wrote : " There would have been some meaning in the case if proceedings had been taken against the paper (*The Bandemataram*) for any of the editorial writings which had given it a speciality among Indian newspapers "; but the flimsy ground—that the paper had reproduced some articles from another paper—on which the prosecution chose to stand proved very slippery indeed. Mr. Chuckerbutty, the Defence Counsel, was able to show that Sri Aurobindo was not really responsible for the publication of the articles. Incidentally Mr. Chuckerbutty revealed the fact that Sri Aurobindo had received during a period of eight or nine

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months only fifty rupees for contributions to the *Bandemataram*!

At last the Chief Presidency Magistrate, one Mr. Kingsford, delivered his judgement, acquitting Sri Aurobindo. He also gave it as his considered opinion that "the general tone of the *Bandemataram* is not seditious." Thus, as the *Bandemataram* wrote editorially on the 29th September 1907, the prosecution "ended in the most complete and dismal fiasco such as no Indian government has ever had to experience before in a sedition case." The prosecution had only succeeded in bringing forcibly to the notice of the intelligentsia and even of the masses the power and the personality behind the *Bandemataram*; for the rest, it had all ended as boomerang to the bureaucracy.

The story is not, however, without its anti-climax. Magisterial wrath required a prey and found in the printer of the *Bandemataram* an easy victim. Thus "only an unfortunate Printer who knew no English and had no notion what all the pother was about was sent to prison for a few months to vindicate the much-damaged majesty of the almighty bureaucracy."[1] Thou hast conquered, indeed, O Bureaucracy!

1. *The Bandemataram*, September 29, 1907.

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CHAPTER NINE

SURAT AND AFTER

I

While the *Bandemataram* case was going on, there appeared in the paper three editorial articles from Sri Aurobindo's pen with the titles "The Foundations of Sovereignty," "Sankharitola's Apologia" and "The Unities of Sankharitola" respectively. In these brilliant, satirical, illuminating and nimbly controversial articles, Sri Aurobindo joined issue with Mr. N. N. Ghose of the *Indian Nation;* while the articles are doubtless enjoyable on account of their sparkle and their controversial brilliance, they are at the same time a serious study of the problems of nationalism and sovereignty with reference to Indian conditions. In the first of the three articles, Sri Aurobindo wrote, in answer to his own question,—What are the elements of Sovereignty ?—as follows :

> "We answer that there are certain essential conditions, geographical unity, a common past, a powerful common interest impelling towards unity and certain political conditions which enable the impulse to realize itself in an organized government expressing the nationality and per-

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petuating its single and united existence."[1]

Sri Aurobindo emphatically maintained that these conditions obtained in India. In reply to Mr. N. N. Ghose's contention that the mixture of races was an insuperable obstacle in the way of national unity, Sri Aurobindo pertinently declared :

> "One might just as well say that different chemical elements cannot combine into a single substance as that different races cannot combine into a single nation."[2]

In another article, written for but not actually published in the *Bandemataram*, Sri Aurobindo went to the very root of the matter and explained in vivid and almost poetic language the *raison d'être* of Indian patriotism :

> "....the pride in the past, the pain of our present, the passion for the future are its (*i.e.*, patriotism's) trunk and branches. Self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, great service, high endurance for the country, are its fruits. And the sap that keeps it alive is the realization of the motherhood of God in the country, the vision of the Mother, the perpetual contemplation, adoration and service of the Mother."[3]

If only Indians would learn to realize themselves, not in the stifling groove of a mere party or of a

1. *The Bandemataram*, August 18, 1907.
2. *Ibid.*, September 1, 1907.
3. Printed in *Selections from the Bandemataram* (Benares, 1922).

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community or of a segment of the country, but in the infinite bounty of the Mother of All, there would then indeed be no " problem " of Indian unity to solve !

But these articles—quite apart from their close-grained fabric of reasoning on the problem of Indian nationalism—were, after all, shots fired in the course of a journalistic duel. Sri Aurobindo is revealed in these articles as an unerring marksman. Did Mr. N. N. Ghose accuse Sri Aurobindo of " incapacity to understand the substance of his (Mr. Ghose's) article "? Very well, then, answered Sri Aurobindo, " we quite admit that it is difficult to understand the mystic wisdom of a sage who asserts that the soundness of his premises has nothing to do with the soundness of his conclusions."[1] And so the duel proceeds, and the slovenly antagonist, fighting with clubs and other useless old weapons, finds himself worsted in every encounter, and at last quits the field leaving the editor of the *Bandemataram* in proud possession of it.

II

Throughout 1907, the ideological differences between the Moderates, led by Sir Phirozeshah Mehta, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and V. Krishnaswami Aiyar, and the Nationalists (or Extremists,

1. *The Bandemataram*, August 25, 1907.

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as they were also called), led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Aurobindo Ghose, continued to be emphasized more and more. The Calcutta Resolutions of 1906 had apparently given little real satisfaction to either party. The Moderates were trying, perhaps, to whittle down the implications of the Calcutta Resolutions; the Nationalists, on the other hand, were even more determined to stick to their guns, nay even to take an extremer stand on the issue of the national demand.

The Surat Congress of December 1907 was to give a final decision in the matter; but even before that, preliminary skirmishes between the rival groups were witnessed all over the country and especially in Bengal and in the Bombay Province. For instance, in the Midnapur session of the Bengal Provincial Conference, held in December 1907, the Nationalists succeeded in getting their own resolutions passed by the Conference; subsequently they held an independent conference of their own with Sri Aurobindo as President and gave a lead to Bengal and a warning to the stage-managers of the Surat Congress. The Lokamanya was overjoyed and asked Sri Aurobindo to bring as many Nationalists as possible to Surat to make the Congress itself an overwhelmingly Nationalist body.

Sri Aurobindo was thus an acknowledged all-India leader and a busy publicist. By temperament he did not love storms and battles; but he had become a hero nevertheless, though by "necessity

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rather than by choice."[1] The imprisonment of his principal co-workers in Bengal, the exile of some others, and the publicity given to his name by the *Bandemataram* case, all compelled him to come forward and take the lead on the public platform. In addition to the circulation of the daily and weekly editions of the *Bandemataram*, reprints from the paper also were published from time to time in Gujarat and had a tremendous vogue all over the country. All this contributed to Sri Aurobindo's universal popularity and justified his position as the Quartermaster-General of the Nationalist Army.

Shortly before proceeding to Surat to attend the momentous Congress Session there, Sri Aurobindo wrote another letter to his wife which provides us with a slender clue to the workings of his mind during this period. Sri Aurobindo begins by saying that he has not a moment's rest; public and private work, *Bandemataram* and Congress affairs, are taking up all his time. His wife should remember this circumstance particularly: that her husband is going through a difficult period, different people trying to pull him in different directions, causing almost distraction to him. His wife at least should preserve her poise and be a source of strength to him. Wedded to a unique individual like Sri Aurobindo, she is bound to be pursued by difficulties; but she should bear them calmly and she

1. Paraphrased from a letter to Dilip (1937).

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should learn to derive pleasure only in the success of her own husband's endeavours. The husband's *dharma* should be the wife's as well; if it were otherwise, she cannot hope to be happy!

From the letter we also learn that Sri Aurobindo proposed to leave for Surat about the middle of December and to return to Calcutta on the 7th January 1908.

III

Matters came to a head at last at Surat. The rival parties had come to the "Sleepy Hollow" in full strength and the stage was finally set for a Marathon contest,—or rather for enacting a pandemonium. Lokamanya Tilak was the accredited Generalissimo of the Nationalists, and he was a whole host by himself. He was, in Sri Aurobindo's words, "the very type and incarnation of the Maratha character, the Maratha qualities, the Maratha spirit, but with the unified solidity in the character, the touch of genius in the qualities, the vital force in the spirit which make a great personality readily the representative man of his people."[1] He was at Surat with a strong contingent from Maharashtra—but, indeed, he spoke for the whole nation. It was inevitable that the *Zeit*

1. *Bankim-Tilak-Dayananda*, pp. 24-5.

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Geist should throw up such a colossus as he:

> "The condition of things in India being given, the one possible aim for political effort resulting and the sole means and spirit by which it could be brought about, this man had to come and, once in the field, had to come to the front."[1]

The Moderates too had leaders of the calibre of Phirozeshah Mehta, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Rash Behari Ghose (the President-Elect of the Surat Congress), and V. Krishnaswami Aiyar. Besides, there were also Lala Lajpat Rai and Surendranath Banerjee, who were not quite definitely of either extreme group. There were, perhaps, reasons enough for the two groups to clash mightily at Surat and to carry on the warfare for several months afterwards. At this distance of time, however, let us admit that they were all very sincere patriots, although they did not tackle the problem of winning *swaraj* in an identical manner. There had to be that trial of strength at Surat and the subsequent mutual mud-slinging; but that need not prevent our admiration from going out equally, though not necessarily to an equal degree, to the champions of *both* Moderatism and Extremism, men who alike according to their lights and temperamental limitations, grappled with tasks of almost superhuman difficulty.

Rightly or wrongly, the Nationalists thought

1. *Bankim-Tilak-Dayananda*, p. 15.

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that the Moderates wished, if not in letter at least in spirit, to go back on the Calcutta stand of the previous year.[1] They therefore held a separate conference under the chairmanship of Sri Aurobindo, "where it was decided that the Nationalists should prevent the attempted retrogression of the Congress by all constitutional means, even by opposing the election of the President if necessary."[2] The Moderates were equally determined to have things their own way. In the open session the two groups could not agree and the proceedings ended—as the proceedings of the Ramgarh Congress of 1939 nearly ended—in ungovernable excitement and utter confusion. It is not necessary here to recapitulate in detail all the unsavoury events that were enacted in the "Sleepy Hollow" of Surat. The rival sections gave their own versions of the happenings, the Extremist version being signed by Tilak, Khaparde, H. Mukherji, B. C. Chatterjee and Sri Aurobindo. Now a *de facto* all-India leader, Sri Aurobindo's capacity for intrepid leadership made a deep impression on the Nationalists from the different parts of India, and henceforth he could count on a huge, attentive and adoring audience wherever he went. Apart from its immediate political repercussions in the country at large, Surat projected Sri Aurobindo—almost against his will—

1. *Indian National Evolution*, Appendix B, pp. xliii-xlvi.
2. *Ibid.*, Appendix B, p. xliii.

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into the blinding glare of all-India leadership. In one bound, as it were, he had joined the select band of Nationalist-Extremists, rubbing shoulders with men of the stature of Tilak, Lajpat Rai and Bepin Pal.

IV

After the Surat imbroglio, Sri Aurobindo paid a visit to Baroda and delivered a few public lectures on the political situation in the country. His former pupils of the Baroda College were not unnaturally very much excited when they saw their revered old teacher; it is said that they let loose the horses that were yoked to the chariot in which Sri Aurobindo was being taken in a procession and dragged it themselves part of the way!

While in Baroda, Sri Aurobindo consulted Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, who had come from Gwalior to Baroda in answer to a wire from Barindra, for some needed guidance in yoga. Political pre-occupations apart, or even because of them, Sri Aurobindo was inveterately drawn to the ardours of yoga, its disciplines, its thrills, its ecstasies, its sun-lit beatitudes. Yogi Lele advised Sri Aurobindo to strive to empty his mind of all mere mental stuff —to make the mind a sheet of white paper to receive a piece of Divine calligraphy—to purify the system by ejecting all ego-stuff so that the Divine can take possession of it and direct its future operations. It was but a little hint—no more than a tiny

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seed ; but it fell on the most fertile soil, proved a banyan seed, and grew into a mighty tree

> Branching so broad and long that in the ground
> The bended twigs take root, and daughters grow
> Above the mother tree, a pillared shade
> High overarched, and echoing walks between.[1]

Sri Aurobindo could now face the so-called " Battle of Life "—a more remorseless and ruthless affair than the Battle of Britain or the Battle of Burma or the Battle of the Pacific—with complete equanimity and sober certainty of ultimate fulfilment. It was in such a mood of *shanti* and clarity of vision that Sri Aurobindo wrote to his wife the third of the famous letters which, ironically enough, owe their preservation to the vigilance of the police. He had, no doubt, originally intended to return to Calcutta from Surat in the first week of January ; he had been unable to do so ; nor was it, after all, his own doing or lack of doing. Whithersoever God directed him, there he had to go ; he had to go for doing God's work, not his own ; he, her husband, was henceforth not a free man ; he was just an instrument in God's hands ; his future movements, his programmes for all the tomorrows yet to come, all would entirely depend on the will of God, on that alone. The grace that had flooded his own soul and truly transfigured it would be hers

1. *Paradise Lost*, IX, ll. 1004-7.

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also, if she sought it in the proper manner. Would she not rise to the height of the possibility opening up before her and prove her husband's real helpmate and *shakti* ?

The three letters that Sri Aurobindo wrote to his wife—there must have been several others also, but only these three have been saved for posterity—by themselves tell an enchanting and inspiring story of aspiration, trial, and fulfilment. In the first, we gain an inkling into the nature of Sri Aurobindo's "mad" aspirations ; in the second, we snap him in a mood of incipient doubt, but of stern endeavour ; in the third, we see that he has already "arrived," that he has successfully accomplished what Teufelsdröckh calls the "annihilation of the self." He was no more Mr. Aurobindo Ghose,—he was now Sri Aurobindo, the son and servant of God, the lover and servant of the Mother. He could now have told himself—as he told "R. on her birthday" :

> Rejoice and fear not for the waves that swell,
> The storms that thunder, winds that sweep ;
> Always our Captain holds the rudder well,
> He does not sleep.[1]

V

After the Surat debacle, Sri Aurobindo did not return to Bengal immediately, as he had originally

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 131.

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intended, but went to Poona with Lele; and after his return to Bombay, Sri Aurobindo went to Calcutta. Wherever he stopped on the way for a day or two, he spoke in public, raising the current political issues to a moral, almost a religious and spiritual, plane. Under the auspices of the Bombay National Union, Sri Aurobindo addressed a large gathering on the 19th January 1908. He had meditated for three days with Lele on the top floor of Majumdar's house in Baroda, and the meditation had brought Sri Aurobindo to a condition of silence of the mind, a condition which he kept for many months, and indeed always thereafter, all activity henceforth proceeding only on the surface. But when Sri Aurobindo went to address the Bombay National Union, the silence of the mind was the sole reality and there was no activity on the surface. Lele told him to make *namaskar* to the audience and wait,—and speech would come to him from some other source than the mind. So in fact the speech came, and ever since all speech, writing, thought and outward activity have so come to him from the same source above the brain-mind.

The Bombay speech is justly famous. He seemed to the audience as one in the grip of a trance; but as he rose to speak, he found the voice, he found the words; he spoke with feeling, he spoke with conviction; he spoke in small, jerky, almost nervous sentences; and he spoke neither like a professional politician nor like an elder statesman,

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but rather like an evangelist, a prophet:

> "You call yourselves Nationalists. What is Nationalism? Nationalism is not a mere political programme. Nationalism is a religion that has come from God; Nationalism is a creed in which you shall have to live.....in Bengal, Nationalism has come to the people as a religion and it has been accepted as a religion. But certain forces which are against that religion are trying to crush its rising strength. It always happens when a new religion is preached, when God is going to be born in the people, that such forces rise with all their weapons in their hands to crush the religion.....Nationalism has not been crushed. Nationalism is not going to be crushed. Nationalism survives in the strength of God and it is not possible to crush it, whatever weapons are brought against it. Nationalism is immortal; Nationalism cannot die....God cannot be killed, God cannot be sent to jail."[1]

How refreshing—how so very unexpectedly refreshing—must it have been to listen to these pointed, prophetic utterances, so utterly devoid of mere political verbiage and legalistic qualification? The word "Nationalism" is repeated again and again in a caressing manner, as if it were indeed a "flame-word rune"; the sentences send out their fragrance and power and one is soon in their thrall; there is

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, pp. 10-12.

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no escape from their magic spells and vast spiritual potency !

The worldly wise people, however, must have heard the speech with a sigh and a shudder, and gravely nodded their heads in disapproval ; the cold rationalists must have been aghast that God—who like the British Crown should be above politics—should thus be trotted out as a clinching argument from a political platform. But Sri Aurobindo persevered ; he dinned his message into the public ear, day after day, week in week out ; he *would* spiritualize politics, he *would* make the political awakening in the country grow into a Vedantic inquiry into the nature of its own truest essence and reach its fulfilment in a self-realization of its own infinite potentialities. To the scared eye of calculating reason it might appear that, to unarmed and puny men and women, there is no other go except tamely and abjectly to bear the " slings and arrows of outrageous fortune "; but even in this degenerate world of ours a David is more than a match for a Goliath ; faith can truly lift mountains and perform miraculous feats. What was necessary, then ? " What is the one thing needful ? What is it that has helped the older men who have gone to prison ? What is it that has been their strength, that has enabled them to stand against all temptations and against all dangers and obstacles ? They have had one and all of them consciously or unconsciously one overmastering idea, one idea which nothing

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can shake, and this was the idea that there is a great Power at work to help India, and that we are doing what it bids us."[1]

Faith, then, was the primary thing; selflessness also was required; as Sri Aurobindo remarked categorically: "this movement of Nationalism is not guided by any self-interest, not at the heart of it.....it is not, at the heart of it, a political self-interest that we are pursuing. It is a religion which we are trying to live. It is a religion by which we are trying to realize God in the nation, in our fellow-countrymen. We are trying to realize Him in the three hundred millions of our people."[2]

Faith, selflessness and courage, triune virtues these that will help the country to realize itself; these must stir within and regulate the conduct of all Nationalists; and aspiring thus and ever so whole-heartedly working, the three hundred millions will soon discover that God Himself is working for them and through them, in order to reveal Himself anew to India and to the whole world!

A new music surely; not statistics, not citations from Burke and Mill and who not, not appeals to British precedents like the Witenagemot and the Magna Charta and collective responsibility, not even a harking back to the French Revolution or the American Declaration of Independence; just an

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 32.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

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invocation to God and an exhortation to Indians to consecrate themselves to the service of God, of God in the Mother,—that's all!

Baroda, Bombay, Poona, Nasik, Amraoti, Nagpur, wherever Sri Aurobindo went, he received a royal welcome and everywhere people listened to him "with bated breath and whispering humbleness." In Nagpur, Sri Aurobindo addressed audiences of several thousands; Dr. Moonje translated the speeches into Hindi; and even peasants in large numbers attended the meetings and received the stirring message. As the Nagpur correspondent wrote to the *Bandemataram*, "his (Sri Aurobindo's) saintly figure has impressed the masses as well as the classes with such marvellous effectiveness, that he is the sole subject of appreciative talk for the latter part of this week."[1]

Returning to Calcutta at last, Sri Aurobindo continued to work with vigour and pertinacity. Here too he was much in demand as a public speaker. The themes were the same old themes,—nationalism, swadeshi, self-help, arbitration, the ethics of suffering, unselfish service, and the necessity for reviving all that was good in Hinduism; but Sri Aurobindo deftly played inspiring variations of the same, and every word sounded as a clarion call.

1. *The Bandemataram*, February 9, 1908.

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VI

In January 1908, Sri Aurobindo published a series of editorial articles in the *Bandemataram*, under the general title "Death or Life," emphasizing some of the ideas he repeatedly stressed in his public speeches. The views expressed in these articles were not unsimilar to those expressed by Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus*, especially in the chapters entitled "Phœnix" and "Organic Filaments." Destruction and creation are ever going on together in this world. The future is in very truth being formed in the present. The debacle at Surat was but the necessary prelude to—or even an indication of the throes of—an imminent rebirth. Sri Aurobindo concluded this thoughtful series of articles with this prophetic declaration: "The old organizations have to be reconstituted to adapt themselves to the new surroundings. The death complained of is only a transition. The burial ground of the old Congress is, as the Saxon phrase goes, only God's-Acre out of which will grow the real, vigorous, popular organization."[1]

The Surat happenings are also the theme of a satirical poem and a satirical drama[2] that appeared in the *Bandemataram* of the 26th January and of the 16th and 23rd February respectively. The

1. *The Bandemataram*, January 12, 1908.
2. The poem and the drama were the work of Shyamsundar Chakravarti.

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verses " supposed to be written by Alexander-de-Convention during the unhappy abode in the Sleepy Hollow of Surat" are in obvious imitation of Cowper's *Alexander Selkirk* and have plenty of bite and vim ; the play, " The Slaying of the Congress—a Tragedy in Three Acts " is, however, an infinitely more damaging piece of satire. The first Act opens in Calcutta, at the time of the Congress of 1906 ; Dadabhai Naoroji, the President, introduces to the assembled delegates the " Lady Congress ":

> Much have I laboured, toiled for many years
> To see this glorious day. Our Lady Congress
> Grown to a fair and perfect womanhood,
> Who at Benares came of age, is now
> With pomp and noble ceremony arrived
> In this Calcutta to assume the charge
> Of her own life into her own proper hands....[1]

Subsequent scenes are located in Bombay, Poona, Bombay again, and, finally, Surat ; the principal characters are, of course, Mehta, Tilak, Gokhale, Surendranath, and Krishnaswami Aiyar ; there are also symbolic abstractions like Congress, Democracy, Nagpur, and Surat. In the end, the Mehta group are shown as succeeding in their endeavour to " slay the Congress." It is a clever, amusing, and most interesting piece of work ; as one reads it today,

1. *The Bandemataram*, February 16, 1908.

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one might find the satire a little bit too severe and sweeping; but one must remember that it was written only about a month after the abortive Surat session of the Congress.

VII

Platform-speech, editorial article, or patriotic poetry, Sri Aurobindo knew the art of making most of his medium; and every week that passed found him installed firmer than ever in the hearts of his countrymen and countrywomen.

It may be difficult for those of us who reached our early manhood in the twenties and thirties to realize how exactly the men and women of an earlier generation reacted to Sri Aurobindo's views, speeches, programmes and newspaper articles. Only the facts can be stated: Sri Aurobindo did indeed galvanize Bengal into a blaze of spirited and high-souled endeavour; he anticipated, to a very considerable extent, some of Mahatma Gandhi's methods of political action, notably passive resistance; and he did achieve the no mean feat of rousing, if only for a little while, the slumbering spiritual forces in the country. But it would be wrong to assume that Sri Aurobindo's political standpoint was entirely pacifist, that he was opposed in principle and in practice to all violence and that he denounced terrorism, insurrection and violence as entirely forbidden by the spirit and letter of the

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Hindu religion.[1] The rule of confining political action to passive resistance was adopted as the best policy for the National Movement at that stage and not as part of a gospel of Non-violence or Ahimsa or Peace. Sri Aurobindo never concealed his opinion that a nation is entitled to attain its freedom by violence, if it can do so or if there is no other way; whether it should do so or not, would depend on what under particular circumstances is the best policy, not on ethical considerations of the Gandhian kind. Sri Aurobindo's position and practice in this matter was the same as Lokamanya Tilak's and that of other Nationalist leaders who were by no means Pacifists or worshippers of Ahimsa. Peace is part of the highest ideal, but it must be spiritual or at the very least psychological in its basis; without a change in human nature, it cannot come with any finality. If attempted on any other basis like a mental principle or the gospel of Ahimsa, it will fail, and even may leave things worse than before.[2]

1. Sri Aurobindo has elaborated his ideas on the subject, generally, in the fifth Chapter of the First Series of *Essays on the Gita*, where he supports the *Gita's* idea of Dharma Yuddha and criticizes, though not expressly, the Gandhian ideas of soul-force. He has given his support to the Allies in the present World War and many of his disciples have joined the Army as airmen, soldiers, doctors, electricians, etc.

2. Sri Aurobindo is no doubt in favour of an attempt to put down war by international agreement and international force,—what is now contemplated in the "New Order,"—if that proves possible, but that would not be Ahimsa, it would be a putting down of anarchic force by legal force, and one cannot be sure that it would be permanent.

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Nor was Sri Aurobindo wanting in an accommodating temper or in the ability to put forward practical proposals for purposes of social amelioration. He was prepared to do all in his power to bring the two wings of the Congress under a common banner once again, so that the country might express its strength through "the united Congress of the whole people."[1] He realized from the outset the importance of organizing village *samitis* and of carrying the gospel of swaraj through them to the masses of the country. As regards the rehabilitation of the village, Sri Aurobindo emphatically declared: "If we are to survive as a nation, we must restore the centres of strength which are natural and necessary to our growth, and the first of these, the basis of all the rest, the old foundation of Indian life and the secret of Indian vitality, is the self-dependent and self-sufficient village organism. If we are to organize swaraj, we must base it on the village. But we must, at the same time, take care to avoid the mistake which did much in the past to retard our national growth. The village must not in our new national life be isolated as well as self-sufficient, but must feel itself bound up with the life of its neighbouring units, living with them in a common group for common purposes."[2]

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 57.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

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But, while Sri Aurobindo was not blind to the exigencies of practical politics nor to the importance of village *samitis* and similar institutions, he confined himself in the main to the stupendous generalities on which alone all durable social and political structures could be reared. Suffering was not a thing to flee from, suffering was the proud badge of our tribe; suffering would ennoble us, purify us, and awaken the slumbering soul within. In his Baruipur speech, Sri Aurobindo detailed the well-known parable of the two birds and drew from it an elevating political lesson:

> "We in India fell under the influence of the foreigners' *maya* which completely possessed our souls. It was the *maya* of the alien rule, the alien civilization, the powers and capacities of the alien people who happen to rule over us. These were as it were so many shackles that put our physical, intellectual and moral life in bondage..... It is only through repression and suffering that *maya* can be dispelled and the bitter fruit of Partition of Bengal administered by Lord Curzon dispelled the illusion. We looked up and saw that the brilliant bird sitting above was none else but ourselves, our real and actual selves. Thus we found *Swaraj* within ourselves and saw that it was in our hands to discover and to realize it."[1]

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, pp. 61-3.

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In his Kishoreganj speech, again, while dealing with the practical problem of organizing village *samitis*, Sri Aurobindo also laid stress on the basic problem of " Unity " in the country :

> " Unity is of the heart and springs from love. The foreign organism which has been living on us, lives by the absence of this love, by division, and it perpetuates the condition of its existence by making us look to it as the centre of our lives and away from our mother and her children.... This drying up of the springs of mutual affection is the cause which needs most to be removed."[1]

Wise and candid words ! And they are as opportune today as they were over thirty-five years ago when they were first uttered ; and alas ! as little heeded today as they were then !

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, pp. 75-8.

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CHAPTER TEN

ASRAMVAS AT ALIPUR

I

Events were now moving swift to their pre-ordained configuration and conclusion. Curzon had divided Bengal and insulted and enraged a great nation ; and, by a strange irony of circumstance, Minto was now called upon to face the music. " Sedition " was rampant, so thought the chaste officers of the Government ; Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, Bhupendranath Dutt, and others were hauled up before the court and some of them were awarded drastic sentences or expropriatory fines. Upadhyaya himself died in the Campbell Hospital, before the case against him had been concluded. For the rest, printer or publisher or editor or contributor, one was likely to be apprehended on the slightest pretext and tried for sedition.

These endless trials and the heavy sentences passed on the apprehended patriots seemed shocking to John Morley himself, and on one occasion he wrote to Minto in an outspoken manner :

" I must confess to you that I am watching with the deepest concern and dismay the thundering sentences that are being passed for sedition,

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etc. We must keep order, but excess of severity is not the path to order. On the contrary, it is the path to the bomb." [1]

Morley had correctly glimpsed the consequences of "excess of severity." Some hot-heads wished to avenge the death of Upadhyaya by killing Mr. Kingsford, the District Judge of Muzzaferpore, who had previously ordered the flogging of a young boy in the court. On the evening of April 10, 1908, a bomb was thrown by two mere boys at the supposed carriage of Mr. Kingsford; as a matter of fact, it really hit two wholly innocent people, the wife and the daughter of a certain Mr. Pringle-Kennedy. Whatever the provocation, the whole thing was utterly stupid and futile, as all such activities ultimately are. As Shyamsundar wrote editorially in the *Bandemataram*:

"Outrages of this kind have absolutely no sanction in our ancient tradition and culture.... Moderatism is imitation of British constitutionalism, this form of so-called Extremism, wherever it may be found to exist in this country, is imitation of European anarchism; and both are equally different from and absolutely foreign to the spirit of the Nationalism which, though opposed by one and occasionally mistaken for the other, is bound in the long run to carve out the

1. *Life and Times of C. R. Das*, p. 58 (Footnote).

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future of India, and realize the eternal destiny of her ancient and composite people."[1]

But—most unfortunately under the circumstances—the Government lost their balance and sense of proportion and started arresting persons right and left. The miniature bomb-factory itself was soon enough located, and Barindra Kumar Ghose, supposed to be the chief brain of the revolutionary organization, was promptly arrested along with most of his associates. The situation was ominous and pregnant with sinister possibilities; and as the *Bandemataram* wrote editorially, it was the merest affectation to deny that the Muzzaferpore outrage had "created a most critical situation in the country."[2]

It was, perhaps, not wholly unnatural that the panic-stricken authorities should have suspected that Sri Aurobindo—wasn't he the elder brother of Barindra Kumar Ghose?—also was somehow or other connected with the revolutionary organization and the bomb-factory. Orders were therefore issued for his arrest also. Accordingly, on May 5, 1908, at about 5 a.m. the Superintendent, the Inspector and other police officers "entered Aurobindo's bedroom, and, on opening his eyes, he saw them standing round. Perhaps, he thought himself in the grip of a nightmare, gazing on apparitions in the half-light of dawn. However, he was not left in

1. *The Bandemataram*, May 10, 1908 (Weekly Edition).
2. *Ibid.*

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suspense long, for he was arrested in bed and handcuffed.....After securing Aurobindo, his bedroom was searched. 'Search' is not the word for it. It was turned inside out. The ransacking went on for three hours...."[1] Sri Aurobindo himself has given a vivid account of his arrest and his subsequent prison experiences in his Bengali book, *Kara-kahini*. We learn from it that it was from his sister, Srimati Sarojini, who ran to his bedroom in a frightened condition, that he learned about the arrival of the police officers. As a result of the search, the officers found a number of essays, poems, letters, etc., which they took away from the house.

The arrest of Sri Aurobindo— and not alone the fact of it but also the manner of it—created a great sensation in the whole country. The *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* asked editorially: "....But why were they (Aurobindo and others) pounced upon in this mysterious manner, handcuffed,[2] and then dragged before the Police Commissioner? Where was the necessity for this outrage?.....It served no other purpose than that of wantonly outraging public feeling."[3] Besides Sri Aurobindo and Barindra Kumar Ghose, thirty-four others also were rounded up in connection with the Muzzaferpore outrage,

1. *The Bandemataram*, May 10, 1908 (Reporter's Account).
2. As a matter of fact, Sri Aurobindo was not handcuffed, but tied with a rope; this was taken off on the protest of Bhupen Bose, the Congress Moderate leader.
3. Quoted in the *Bandemataram*, May 10, 1908.

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the bomb-factory at Manicktolla, and the supposed wide-spread revolutionary conspiracy of which these were apparently but startling symptoms.

Produced before Mr. F. L. Halliday, Commissioner of Police at Lal Bazaar, Sri Aurobindo reserved his statement ; Mr. Nolini Kanta Gupta[1] stated that he " was oblivious of the reason for which he was charged." When they were produced later before Mr. T. Thornhill, Chief Presidency Magistrate, the prosecution tried to make capital out of the fact that Sri Aurobindo was one of the proprietors of the garden where the bombs had been manufactured. Mr. Thornhill transferred the case to Alipur. The prisoners also, including Sri Aurobindo, were sent to Alipur and lodged in Jail there.

II

The " Alipur Case," as it henceforth came to be universally called, was the talk of the whole country for the next twelve months or so. It was known that the prosecution were straining every nerve to secure the conviction of Sri Aurobindo and thereby to cast a stain on the white flower of utterly blameless life he had so far held aloft through fair weather and foul weather alike. The eminent criminal lawyer, the late Mr. Eardley Norton, then at the height of his powers and reputation, was engaged by the

1. Mr. Nolini Kanta Gupta is now the Secretary of the Sri Aurobindo Asram.

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Government to conduct the prosecution. It was therefore necessary to organize the defence of Sri Aurobindo on an adequate enough basis. His sister, Srimati Sarojini, appealed in the following terms to Sri Aurobindo's countrymen :

> " I know all my countrymen do not hold the same political opinions as he (Sri Aurobindo). But I feel some delicacy in saying that probably there are few Indians who do not appreciate his great attainments, his self-sacrifice, his single-minded devotion to the country's cause, and the high spirituality of his character. These embolden me, a woman, to stand before every son and daughter of India for help to defend a brother, —my brother and theirs too."[1]

The appeal—which even to read today creates a tremor in our whole being, down to the inmost depths—was eloquently supported by the *Bengalee*, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, and other papers. Response to the appeal was not very slow in coming ; and it came from the most unexpected places. A blind beggar—all honour to him !—gave Srimati Sarojini one rupee out of the alms he had assiduously collected, perhaps over a period of a month or even a year ; a poor student, by denying himself his daily tiffin, gave a modest contribution ; the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha bestirred itself to make collections for the Defence Fund.[2] And other individuals and

1. *The Bandemataram*, June 13, 1908.
2. *Ibid.*, July 26, 1908.

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agencies also interested themselves in making proper arrangements for the defence of Sri Aurobindo.

While all this no doubt gave an indication of the amount of good-will in the country towards Sri Aurobindo, the actual sum of money that was collected from week to week was by no means satisfactory. After two months, hardly Rs. 23,000 had been collected!

Meanwhile the preliminary trial was going on in Alipur before Mr. L. Birley, the officiating District Magistrate. The trial commenced on the 19th May, 1908. At the outset, bail was refused to Sri Aurobindo. Mr. Kingsford, the intended victim of the Muzzaferpore outrage, being summoned to give evidence, said somewhat complacently: "I was Chief Presidency Magistrate, Calcutta, from August 1904 to March 1908. I had to try many sedition cases....I acquitted as many as I convicted."

The preliminary trial was a long one. When Sri Aurobindo was brought before Mr. Birley on the 11th June, "a black ring was distinctly visible round Aurobindo Babu's eyes"[1]; two days later—"Aurobindo Babu laughed heartily while conversing with his pleaders, only he looked a bit paler than before."[2] And so with interesting vicissitudes the trial dragged on; in the early part of August, Sri Aurobindo was ill in jail[3]; and at last, on the 19th

1. *The Bandemataram*, June 14, 1908.
2. *Ibid.*, June 14, 1908.
3. *Ibid.*, August 16, 1908; *vide* sub-leader on "Very Ill in Jail."

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August, Mr. Birley framed charges and committed to sessions Sri Aurobindo and the others.

Srimati Sarojini Devi had collected by then, as we saw above, only Rs. 23,000 ; she therefore appealed to her countrymen for another Rs. 37,000, since the defence costs were computed to exceed Rs. 60,000.

III

What were Sri Aurobindo's feelings when he found himself checkmated by this seemingly inexplicable bolt from the blue, which put an abrupt end to his political career ? What did he think and feel, how did he bear the rigours of the imprisonment,—the bad food, the inadequate clothes, the lack of books and journals, the lack of light and free air, and, above all, the strain of boredom and the creeping solitariness of the gloomy cell ? Were there regrets, recriminations, or expostulations ?

Sri Aurobindo has answered our questions, in language that often acquires wings and wafts us to the seventh heaven of radiant ecstasy and hope incommensurable, in his *Kara-kahini* and also in his Uttarpara speech, delivered a year later. We shall therefore answer *our* questions in *his* own words :

> " When I was arrested and hurried to the Lal Bazar hajat, I was shaken in faith for a while, for I could not look into the heart of His intention. Therefore I faltered for a moment and cried out in my heart to Him, ' What is this that has hap-

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pened to me ? I believed that I had a mission to work for the people of my country and until that work was done, I should have Thy protection. Why then am I here and on such a charge '? A day passed and a second day and a third, when a voice came to me from within, ' Wait and see. ' Then I grew calm and waited ; I was taken from Lal Bazar to Alipur and was placed for one month in a solitary cell apart from other men. There I waited day and night for the voice of God within me, to know what He had to say to me, to learn what I had to do. In this seclusion, the earliest realization, the first lesson came to me. I remembered then that a month or more before my arrest, a call had come to me to put aside all activity, to go into seclusion and to look into myself, so that I might enter into closer communion with Him. "[1]

On that occasion, however, he had proved weak and had refused to listen to that voice ; politics and poetry were too dear to him then, and he could not give them up. Had he not, indeed, told Yogi Lele that he, Sri Aurobindo, would follow the path of Yoga only if it did not interfere with his politics and his poetry ?[2] So long as he was a free man, Sri Aurobindo would not break the bonds himself—and therefore God had to do it for him, though in

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, pp. 88-9.
2. Dilip, Account of his Interview with Sri Aurobindo in *Tirthankar*.

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His own way! God seemed now to whisper to Sri Aurobindo: "I have had another thing for you to do and it is for that I have brought you here, to teach you what you could not learn for yourself and to train you for my work."[1]

Meanwhile Sri Aurobindo had been permitted by the authorities to send for books, and thus it was that he started reading the *Bhagavad Gita*. "His strength entered into me and I was able to do the *sadhana* of the *Gita*."[2] Sri Aurobindo had already tried over a long period to apprehend the true inwardness and glory of the Indian religion and spiritual tradition, Sanatana Dharma, and to accept it in its entirety; now it all became, not so much a matter of intellectual comprehension, but a fact of intimate realization; he thus saw by direct illumination the eternal truth of "what Sri Krishna demanded of Arjuna and what He demands of those who aspire to do His work, to be free from repulsion and desire, to do work for Him without the demand for fruit, to renounce self-will and become a passive and faithful instrument in His hands, to have an equal heart for high and low, friend and opponent, success and failure, yet not to do His work negligently."[3] The constant reading and re-reading of the *Gita*, ceaseless meditation on its undying truths, made it

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 90.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 90-1.

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possible for Sri Aurobindo to seize in an act of undivided attention "the core of the *Gita*'s teaching"; the *Gita* seemed to tell him in friendly, yet unambiguous and peremptory accents:

> "Slay then desire; put away attachment to the possession and enjoyment of the outwardness of things. Separate yourself from all that comes to you as outward touches and solicitations, as objects of the mind and senses. Learn to bear and reject all the rush of the passions and to remain securely seated in your inner self even while they rage in your members, until at last they cease to affect any part of your nature. Bear and put away similarly the forceful attacks and even the slightest insinuating touches of joy and sorrow. Cast away liking and disliking, destroy preference and hatred, root out shrinking and repugnance. Let there be a calm indifference to these things and to all the objects of desire in all your nature. Look on them with the silent and tranquil regard of an impersonal spirit."[1]

The doubts—the few that had persisted yet in prison—were now a thing of the past; Sri Aurobindo's soul already experienced a calm and rich lucidity and—lo and behold!—Sri Aurobindo opened his eyes, and *saw*:

> "I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high walls that I

1. *Essays on the Gita*, II, p. 484.

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was imprisoned; no, it was Vasudeva who surrounded me. I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell,[1] but it was not the tree, I knew it was Vasudeva, it was Sri Krishna whom I saw standing there and holding over me His shade. I looked at the bars of my cell, the very grating that did duty for a door, and again I saw Vasudeva. It was Narayana who was guarding and standing sentry over me. Or I lay on the coarse blankets that were given me for a couch and felt the arm of Sri Krishna around me, the arms of my Friend and Lover. This was the first use of the deeper vision He gave me. I looked at the prisoners in jail, the thieves, the murderers, the swindlers, and as I looked at them, I saw Vasudeva, it was Narayana whom I found in these darkened souls and misused bodies."[2]

Incarceration, then, far from breaking Sri Aurobindo, only re-made him in the hallowed mould of God's desire; the prison did not cramp his movements, but proved rather a temple of liberation and fulfilment; even in confinement he experienced neither peril nor shortcoming, but only the soul's utter joy and freedom; and even when he inhabited but an area of forty-five square feet, he sensed the splendours of the Infinite and learned to lose himself in the "vasts of God."

1. After a period of solitary confinement, Sri Aurobindo had been permitted to walk outside his cell for half an hour in the mornings and evenings.

2. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, pp. 92-3.

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IV

While thus all was felicity within, the world outside continued to be agitated by the imprisonment of Sri Aurobindo and the protracted and sensational trial that followed it. The case commenced in the Sessions Court in October 1908. Mr. Beachcroft, the District and Sessions Judge, who tried the case, had been with Sri Aurobindo in Cambridge, and had stood second in Greek, while Sri Aurobindo had stood first. He had now the by no means pleasant task of "trying" the chained and handcuffed Sri Aurobindo on a charge of waging war against the King. Mr. Eardley Norton appeared for the prosecution (who obviously didn't want to take any chances whatsoever); after the first few days, Chittaranjan Das—the "Desabandhu" of a later day—appeared for Sri Aurobindo. Srimati Sarojini Devi and her friends thus succeeded in avoiding the "sharks" of the legal profession and found in Chittaranjan a true "Defender of the Faith." At that time, Chittaranjan was known to be a rising criminal lawyer, a sensitive poet, and, above all, an unflinching idealist and an adoring son and servant of the Mother. He came,—and the prospect brightened at once all around!

Chittaranjan, although he was not then the power in the legal world that he became soon after, gave his whole heart and soul to the organization of the defence, and for the next six months dedicated himself to the sacred task of defending Sri Aurobindo.

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We learn that "in this case 206 witnesses were examined, 4,000 documents were filed, and the exhibits, consisting of bombs, revolvers, ammunition, detonators, fuses, poisonous acids, and other explosive materials, numbered 5,000."[1] Poet, idealist, patriot, Chittaranjan enthusiastically came to his brother poet's rescue, put away from him "all other thoughts and abandoned all his practice" and "sat up half the night day after day for months and broke his health"[2]—and all to save Sri Aurobindo; and he did succeed in saving him. But Sri Aurobindo knew all the time that, though his friend Chittaranjan was the instrument, Vasudeva alone was the prime mover and doer!

It is not necessary here to go over the whole ground once again. Well, the prosecution—though they sought to move literally heaven and earth—failed to prove their case against Sri Aurobindo. Asked by the Court, Sri Aurobindo said that he would leave the case entirely to his Lawyers; he himself did not wish to make any statement or answer the court's questions. The case for the defence was that it was perfectly true that Sri Aurobindo had taught the people of India the meaning and the message of national independence; if that in itself was a crime, Sri Aurobindo would willingly plead guilty to the charge. There was no need to bring

1. *Life and Times of C. R. Das*, p. 59.
2. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 96.

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in witnesses to prove this particular charge; Sri Aurobindo readily and gladly would admit it and he would be willing to suffer to the uttermost for having propagated the message and elucidated the meaning of national independence. But let not the prosecution charge Sri Aurobindo with things he had never even dreamed about, which were wholly repugnant to his entire philosophy of life and conduct; he had taught the people of India how the ideals of democracy and national independence could be translated into realities in terms of Vedantic self-discipline and self-realization. He had never had any part or lot in the terrorist movement, he had never countenanced it, he had never approved of the actions of the people who had implicated themselves in the movement. He was a Vedantic Nationalist, not a revolutionary terrorist!

Chittaranjan's speech for the defence was spread over eight days and it was an eloquent epic of forensic art. What was Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of action,—what was it in the individual and national planes? Just this, affirmed Chittaranjan: Vedantism. Sri Aurobindo was not a politician in the ordinary, Western sense, but one to whom politics was as spiritual an experience as was religion itself. Chittaranjan continued:

"As in the case of individuals you cannot reach your God with extraneous aid, but you must make an effort—that supreme effort—yourself before you can realize the God within you;

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so also with a nation. It is by itself that a nation must grow; a nation must attain its salvation by its unaided effort. No foreigner can give you that salvation. It is within your own hands to revive that spirit of nationality. That is the doctrine of nationality which Aurobindo has preached throughout, and that was to be done not by methods which are against the traditions of the country.....the doctrines he preached are not doctrines of violence but doctrines of passive resistance. It is not bombs, but suffering.....He says, believe in yourself; no one attains salvation who does not believe in himself. Similarly, he says, in the case of a nation."[1]

How Chittaranjan proved that the letter purported to have been written by Barindra Kumar Ghose to Sri Aurobindo was no more than a forgery—" as clumsy as those Piggott had got up to incriminate Parnell after the murder of Lord Cavendish in Phœnix Park "[2]—is among the most thrilling denouements in the history of Indian criminal cases.

Having thus ably demolished what had initially appeared to be a piece of damning evidence against Sri Aurobindo, Chittaranjan, in his peroration, made a fervent appeal to Mr. Beachcroft the Judge and the two Assessors in the case :

" My appeal to you is this, that long after the controversy will be hushed in silence, long after

1. *Life and Times of C. R. Das*, p. 62.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

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this turmoil, the agitation will have ceased, long after he is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism and the lover of humanity. Long after he is dead and gone, his words will be echoed and re-echoed, not only in India, but across distant seas and lands. Therefore, I say that the man in his position is not only standing before the bar of this court, but before the bar of the High Court of History."[1]

Prophetic words—and more than prophetic words! On April 13, 1909, the two Assessors returned a unanimous verdict of "Not guilty." Nearly a month later, accepting the Assessors' verdict, Mr. Beachcroft acquitted Sri Aurobindo. But many of the others among the thirty-six accused were awarded various sentences, though it is not to our purpose to follow their fortunes any further.

V

While still in the Alipur jail (the Government Hotel at Alipur, as Sri Aurobindo once humorously called it),[2] he had composed a few poems revealing the strength of his new-found faith. The true path that God wishes His devotee to tread is not the proverbial bed of roses; it is studded with sharp

1. *Life and Times of C. R. Das*, pp. 59-64.
2. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 206.

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thorns and steely brambles ; it is punctuated by the shocks of circumstance. He ever tells His devotee in no ambiguous terms the hazards that he should bravely face and overcome :

I sport with solitude here in my regions,
Of misadventure have made me a friend.
Who would live largely ? Who would live freely ?
Here to the wind-swept uplands ascend.

I am the lord of tempest and mountain,
I am the Spirit of freedom and pride.
Stark must he be and a kinsman to danger
Who shares my kingdom and walks at my side.[1]

In another poem, *The Mother of Dreams*, written in long lines of linked sweetness and interior double-rhymes, Sri Aurobindo's Muse rides triumphantly on the crest of a complicated rhythm and achieves a memorable articulation in eloquent praise of the Mother—" the home-of-all, the womb-of-all," in Hopkins's pregnant phrase—who in myriad ways manifests Herself to terrestrial men and women. What visions are these that visit us as we are lapped in grey, soft, and restful slumber ? What sights are these, what sounds are these, what are these images, what is this bliss profound,—what are these that thus implicate us in their grandeur and impenetrable mystery ? Sri Aurobindo's imagination and his spiritual fervour weave a velvet magic about these meandering and soul-enchanting lines ; the

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 121.

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poem is itself a dream world of incomprehensible beauty and felicity. One must read and *chant* the whole poem slowly and reverently—for truly is it endowed with something of the *mantra sakti* of the revealed word—and then only one will be able to gain entrance into the deathless world of its making. We can but quote the concluding lines here, as inspired a piece of utterance as any in the whole body of Sri Aurobindo's poetry :

Open the gate where thy children wait in thy world of a
beauty undarkened.

High-throned on a cloud, victorious, proud I have espied
Maghavan ride when the armies of wind are behind him ;

Food has been given for my tasting from heaven and fruit
of immortal sweetness ;

I have drunk wine of the kingdoms divine and have heard
the change of music strange from a lyre which our hands
cannot master ;

Doors have swung wide in the chambers of pride where the
Gods reside and the Apsaras dance in their circles faster
and faster.

For thou art she whom we first can see when we pass the
bounds of the mortal,

There at the gates of the heavenly states thou hast planted
thy wand enchanted over the head of the Yogin waving.

From thee are the dream and the shadows that seem and
the fugitive lights that delude us ;

Thine is the shade in which visions are made ; sped by thy
hands from celestial lands come the souls that rejoice
for ever.

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Into thy dream-worlds we pass or look in thy magic glass,
then beyond thee we climb out of Space and Time to
the peak of divine endeavour.[1]

From the fullness of such poetic revelation, it is sacrilege to detract anything,—and mere exegesis must only end in detraction. Suffice for us to know that Sri Aurobindo had become, while in the Alipur jail, the sort of man who could peep into Infinity and render its untranslatable wonders in such streams of vibrant melody. Sri Aurobindo—and this alone matters to us—has safely and purely come through the devouring coils of adverse circumstance; he has baffled the Everlasting No and affirmed the Everlasting Yea; he has ceased to be a "traveller between life and death" and become instead a Pilgrim of Eternity!

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 122.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

KARMAYOGIN

I

Sri Aurobindo had spent one whole year in jail, —in Alipur most of the time ; but it had, after all, been a year of *asramvas*, not a year of bleak or painful incarceration ; the jail had proved no cage of confinement, but veritably a Yogasram where Purushottama was his friend and *guru*, his companion and master. Thus had his "enemies," by sending him to prison, only opened to him the door of felicity. And it had always been like that ! The highest good had invariably come to Sri Aurobindo from his seeming "enemies"; and now he had *no* enemy in the world ![1]

Emancipated already in his mind and his soul, Sri Aurobindo was now at long last free in a strictly material sense as well. Was he proud of his success, exultant, or triumphant ? Not likely ! Bengal—and India—had changed somewhat during the twelve months he had spent in jail. His friends and his co-workers were taken far away from him,

1. Summarized from Sri Aurobindo's *Kara-kahini*.

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scattered by the virulent blasts of repression and deportation. In vain Morley nursed the worm of discontent within his own heart; in vain the worm insisted on muttering unpleasantly to his ear:

> "That's the Russian argument; by packing off train-loads of suspects to Siberia, we'll terrify the anarchists out of their wits, and all will come out right. That policy did not work out brilliantly in Russia, and did not save Russia from a Duma, the very thing that the Trepoffs and the rest of the 'offs' 'deprecated and detested.'"[1]

But the deportations continued still and the ranks of the nationalists thinned almost to nothingness. The very *mantra* of *Bandemataram* was but fitfully, and not so lustily, heard. As Sri Aurobindo remarked in the course of the Uttarpara speech:

> "..... now that I have come out, I find all changed. One who always sat by my side and was associated in my work is a prisoner in Burma;[2].... I looked round when I came out, I looked round for those to whom I had been accustomed to look for counsel and inspiration. I did not find them. There was more than that. When I went to jail, the whole country was alive with the cry of *Bandemataram*, alive with the hope of a nation, the hope of millions of men

1. *Life and Times of C. R. Das*, p. 71.

2. The reference is to Lokamanya Tilak, who was then a prisoner at Mandalay.

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who had newly risen out of degradation. When I came out of jail I listened for that cry, but there was instead a silence. A hush had fallen on the country and men seemed bewildered ; for instead of God's bright heaven full of the vision of the future that had been before us, there seemed to be overhead a leaden sky from which human thunders and lightnings rained."[1]

It was enough to crack a small man's faith ; but Sri Aurobindo was not a small man, he contained multitudes ; he knew, not as the result of close ratiocination only, but even as a matter of unshakable faith, that that too was but God manifesting Himself in His own way for achieving His own purposes in His own good time. Sri Aurobindo knew it all, he was sure of it all, and he wanted others also to share his faith and strength.

Returning from Alipur to Calcutta, Sri Aurobindo hurled himself once more into " divine endeavour," stern endeavour in the name of, and on behalf of, the Divine. He spoke in public meetings, he issued weighty statements, he wrote important articles ; he did the very things he had done before, before his imprisonment and trial,— but in the seeming similarity was there a vital difference as well. Sri Aurobindo would now be a willing and plastic instrument in the hands of the Divine ; he would no doubt still pursue his political

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, pp. 84-5.

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and other vocations, but without malice and without rancour and without the least taint of selfishness. Hundred-limbed repression might prevail for the nonce, but it should not terrify the just ; what, after all, was repression ? Sri Aurobindo answers :

> "We were building an edifice to be the temple of our Mother's worship.... It was then that He came down upon us. He flung Himself upon the building we had raised. He shook the roof with His mighty hands, and part of the building was displaced and ruined. Why has He done this ?
>
> Repression is nothing but the hammer of God that is beating us into shape so that we may be moulded into a mighty nation and an instrument for His work in the world. We are iron upon His anvil and the blows are showering upon us, not to destroy, but to recreate. Without suffering there can be growth."[1]

Had not Sri Aurobindo seen through the jailer and the jail, the Judge and the Assessors, the lawyers on either side, Mr. Norton and Chittaranjan, the witnesses and the visitors, and seen behind them all but *one* visage, *one* form, *one* manifestation ? Temporary set-backs should not frighten the true *sadhaka* in the Temple of Patriotism ; set-backs are quite natural, set-backs are inevitable in a high endeavour like theirs ; but Indians as men, and India

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, pp. 133-4.

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as their nation, will prevail nevertheless in the end. If our cause is just and if our means are not unworthy of our cause, nothing can stand for ever against the realization of our aims :

> "Our object, our claim is that we shall not perish as a nation, but live as a nation. Any authority that goes against this object will dash itself against the eternal throne of justice—it will dash itself against the laws of nature which are the laws of God, and be broken to pieces."[1]

II

Finding that the Nationalist Party in Bengal had all but disintegrated, Sri Aurobindo started publishing two weekly papers, the *Karmayogin* in English and the *Dharma* in Bengali, with a view to organizing the party on efficient lines and educating public opinion. It is important to remember that, although he was offered the editorship of the *Bengalee* and although he was earnestly requested by some people to re-start the *Bandemataram*, Sri Aurobindo wished rather to break fresh ground by conducting journals entirely his own, the *Dharma* and the *Karmayogin*. The very names are significant and reveal the mind of their editor like an open book. His aim now was no more party politics ; it was rather the dissemination of the

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 140.

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principles of Sanatana Dharma; it was rather the hourly practice of the Karmayoga taught by the Lord in the *Gita*.

In the first issue, the *Karmayogin* is described as "a weekly Review of National Religion, Literature, Science, Philosophy, etc."; the contributors are: "Srijut Aurobindo Ghose and others"; the cover illustration is of the Chariot, with Arjuna and Sri Krishna seated in it; and the motto of the journal is, of course, the *Gita vakya*, "Yoga is skill in works." Sri Aurobindo editorially explained the "policy" of the paper as follows:

> "The *Karmayogin* will be more of a national review than a weekly newspaper. We shall notice current events only as they evidence, help, affect or resist the growth of national life and the development of the soul of the nation.... if there is no creation, there must be disintegration; if there is no advance and victory, there must be recoil and defeat."

And what is Karmayoga but "the application of Vedanta and Yoga to life"? The paper would seek to explain how Karmayoga may be practised in the daily life of the nation by one and all.

The early issues of the *Karmayogin* published Sri Aurobindo's English translations of the *Isha*, *Kena* and *Katha Upanishads*; poems like *Who*, *Baji Prabhou*, *Epiphany*, *The Birth of Sin*, and *An Image* appeared in other issues; likewise the paper gave Sri Aurobindo's beautiful renderings of Kalidasa's

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Ritusamhara and Bankim Chandra's great novel, *Anandamath*—the latter, however, was not completed, only thirteen chapters appearing in the *Karmayogin*; finally, there appeared serially in the same paper valuable and constructive contributions like *A System of National Education, The Brain of India, The National Value of Art* and *The Ideal of the Karmayogin.* In some of the later issues appeared a series of remarkable, Landor-like, *Conversations of the Dead*—Dinshaw, Perizade; Turiu, Uriu; and Two Souls in Pitri-lok. In the last of the three conversations, Sri Aurobindo makes the Souls in Pitri-lok say: The sorrows of the world call us; we'll return to the earth; we will re-establish in it the reign of joy and beauty and harmony!

But politics and controversy, too, frequently figured in the *Karmayogin.* Papers like the *Bengalee* and the *Indian Social Reformer* had chosen to ridicule Sri Aurobindo's Uttarpara Speech. What, Vasudeva appear and speak—actually *speak*!—to an "under-trial" prisoner? Impossible and altogether improbable! The fourth issue of the *Karmayogin* gave a balanced and detailed rejoinder to these immaculate rationalists of Bombay and Calcutta—a reply that is worth reading even today. Again, when the late Gopal Krishna Gokhale made a speech in Poona in connection with the murders of Curzon Wylie and Lalcaca, the *Karmayogin* came out with a slashingly sarcastic editorial, which concluded with these scintillating words:

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"He (Gokhale) publishes himself now as the righteous Bibhishan who, with the Sugrives, Angads, and Hanumans of Madras and Allahabad, has gone to join the Avatar of Radical absolutism in the India Office, and ourselves as the Rakshasa to be destroyed by this Holy Alliance."

Sri Aurobindo, like all his countrymen, did not fail to recognise the finer elements in Gokhale's mind and character; he described the Poona leader in his Kumartuli speech as "one who had served and made sacrifices for the country"[1]; but when he denounced the ideals and the actions of the Nationalists, when he said that "the ideal of independence was an ideal which no sane man could hold," when he described the people who advocated the peaceful methods of passive resistance as "men who, out of cowardice, do not speak out the thought that is in their hearts," then it became incumbent upon Sri Aurobindo to accept the challenge and enter the fray. In both his College Square and Kumartuli speeches, Sri Aurobindo replied to Gokhale and incidentally went into the implications of the policy of Passive Resistance advocated by the Nationalists:

"This was a very dangerous teaching which Mr. Gokhale introduced into his speech, that the ideal of independence—whether we call it Swaraj

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 211.

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or autonomy or Colonial Self-Government, because these two things in a country circumstanced like India meant in practice the same—cannot be achieved by peaceful means.....He has told the ardent hearts which cherish this ideal of independence, and are determined to strive towards it, that their ideal can only be achieved by violent means. If any doctrine can be dangerous, if any teacher can be said to have uttered words dangerous to the peace of the country, it is Mr. Gokhale himself. We have told the people that there is a peaceful means of achieving independence in whatever form we aspire to it. We have said that by self-help, by passive resistance, we can achieve it.... Passive resistance means two things. It means first that in certain matters we shall not co-operate with the Government of this country until it gives us what we consider our rights. Secondly, if we are persecuted, if the plough of repression is passed over us, we shall meet it, not by violence, but by suffering, by passive resistance, by lawful means. We have not said to our young men, "when you are repressed, retaliate"; we have said, "suffer".... We are showing the people of this country in passive resistance the only way in which they can satisfy their legitimate aspiration without breaking the law and without resorting to violence."[1]

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, pp. 194-7.

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Meanwhile, the Minto-Morley Reforms were in the air and with his intimate knowledge of the British people and their wares he had little doubt that the Reforms belonged to the category of "Brummagem goods"[1]; they would only throw "an apple of fresh discord among them"[2]; they were hollow and pretentious, and "this offer of conciliation in one hand and the pressure of repression in the other"[3] was a dangerously double-edged policy. As the late Mr. S. Srinivasa Iyengar pointed out, nearly twenty years later on the floor of the Central Legislative Assembly, "In the one hand there is the sugar plum and in the other there is repression."[4] Sri Aurobindo therefore rightly insisted that the Reforms were a mockery and a trap and that the co-operation expected from the people was not true co-operation but merely a parody of the same.[5]

What, then, must the people do? In his "Open Letter to My Countrymen," dated July 1909, Sri Aurobindo discussed with boldness and clarity the major problems facing the country and outlined a six-point programme: persistence, with a strict regard to law, in a peaceful policy of self-help and

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 209.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
4. The present writer's *S. Srinivasa Iyengar, the Story of a Decade of Indian Politics*, p. 74.
5. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 200.

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passive resistance; "No control, no co-operation" with the Government; a rapprochement with the Moderates wherever possible and the reconstitution of an united Congress; revival of the Boycott movement on an effective basis; extension of the programme to other Provinces and ultimately to the whole country; organization of a system of co-operation which will not contravene the law and will yet enable workers to proceed with the task of self-help and national efficiency.[1]

III

Earnest and serious, serene and self-possessed, Sri Aurobindo went through the daily business of his life as if it were all a field for the practice of Yoga, as if indeed "all Life is Yoga." But occasionally he gave vent to his irritation, and passages of humour or sarcasm resulted. Thus about a certain curfew order:

> "It appeared that we were peaceful citizens until sunset, but after sunset we turned into desperate characters,—well, he was told, even half-an-hour before sunset; apparently even the sun could not be entirely trusted to keep us straight. We had, it seems, stones in our pockets to throw at the police and some of us, perhaps, dangle bombs in our *chadders*."[2]

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, pp. 249-50.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 115-6.

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Speaking on another occasion, Sri Aurobindo thus described the " resourcefulness " and the imaginative flights of the police :

> " .... there was the imagination of a very highly imaginative police which saw hidden behind the lathi the bomb. Now nobody ever saw the bombs. But the police were quite equal to the occasion ; they thought there might be bombs. And what if there were not ? Their imagination was quite equal to realizing any bomb that could not be materialized.... Our efficient police have always shown a wonderful ability. Generally when a dacoity is committed, the police are nowhere near.... They only come up when the dacoity is long over and say, ' Well, this is the work of the Nationalist volunteers.' "[1]

In his Kumartuli speech, again, Sri Aurobindo described with playful irony his varied " friends "—the Hare Street friend, the Police, the Madras friend—and replied to their " friendly" suggestions. The Madras friend—the *Indian Patriot*—had advised Sri Aurobindo to give up politics and take to *Sannyasa ;* the police advised him not to open his mouth " too much "; the Hare Street friend advised Sri Aurobindo to devote himself to literature and religion, and not to make speeches on Swadeshi and Boycott. Sri Aurobindo twitted the last friend with the bland reply :

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose,* pp. 175-6.

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"He (Sri Aurobindo) *was* devoting himself to literature and religion. He was writing, as he wrote before, on Swaraj and Swadeshi, and that was a form of literature. He was speaking on Swaraj and Swadeshi, and that was part of his religion."[1]

And yet Sri Aurobindo was forced to realize that the country, as a whole, was not ready to give effect to his programme of Swaraj and Swadeshi, the six-point programme he had elaborated in July 1909. Intellectually, people often saw the wisdom of Sri Aurobindo's programme and its undoubted potentialities. But that was not enough: the first enthusiasm of a few years ago had more or less died down, the new indeterminate flood showed no signs of coming; and Sri Aurobindo saw clearly that a mass movement will not be possible in the near future; the portents were far too evident and he, brave realist that he was, could not miss them; the Minto-Morley Reforms had actually hoodwinked many of his countrymen into a somnolent acquiescence in them; and the bitterness of the fruit can only be felt when it was actually tasted. Such fore-knowledge as was his only appeared a disturbing nuisance to the timid and the easy-going. No, no, Sri Aurobindo must throw up the political sponge for good,—and the sooner, the better!

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 205.

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IV

Only against such a twilight background of resignation and approaching renunciation can we rightly understand Sri Aurobindo's brief spell of political and journalistic activity during the latter half of 1909. He was on his feet frequently enough, —in Calcutta and in other district towns in Bengal ; he led the Nationalist Party in the Bengal Provincial Conference at Hooghly in September 1909 and made the Conference accept the Nationalist resolutions ; besides, poems, essays, exhortations, these, as they appeared in the columns of the *Karmayogin*, gave abundant proof of Sri Aurobindo's restless intellectual activity.

In a series of articles which have since been reprinted under the title, *The Brain of India*, Sri Aurobindo discussed illuminatingly the problem of educating the youth of India. These articles are not journalism ; they are a serious attempt to outline a philosophy of education. Modern Indian education, being an absurd copy and even vulgarization of Western models, has compelled us to barter away our ancient heritage for the proverbial mess of pottage ; it has debased us, it has almost destroyed us. The clue to reform should lie in reviving, as far as may be feasible, our traditional methods of education. After all, Indians can lay claim to a glorious past. Now asks Sri Aurobindo :

" What was the secret of that gigantic intellectuality, spirituality and superhuman moral force

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which we see pulsating in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata,* in the ancient philosophy, in the supreme poetry, art, sculpture and architecture of India ? What was at the basis of the incomparable public works and engineering achievement, the opulent and exquisite industries, the great triumph of science, scholarship, jurisprudence, logic, metaphysics, the unique social structure ? What supported the heroism and self-abandonment of the Kshattriya, the Sikh and the Rajput, the unconquerable national vitality and endurance ? What was it that stood behind that civilization second to none in the massiveness of its outlines or the perfection of its details ? Without a great and unique discipline involving a perfect education of soul and mind, a result so immense and persistent would have been impossible."[1]

There were the *asrams,* of course, and there were also the ancient Universities, like those of Nalanda and Takshasila ; but were not these *asrams* and Universities themselves based on a vital principle ? Where did the ancients build and locate the reservoir of vital energy that alone could have upheld those stupendous superstructures in the realms of matter, thought and spirit ?

Sri Aurobindo firmly thinks that the clue to the whole secret lies in the practice of *brahmacharya,*

1. *The Brain of India,* pp. 16-18.

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so widely prevalent in the good old days.[1] *Brahmacharya* sought to "raise up the physical to the spiritual"; it gradually perfected the instruments of knowledge; it led to the heightening and ultimate perfection of the *sattvik* elements in human nature; it created, as it were, an infallible engine of universal knowledge within.

But, adds Sri Aurobindo, "this is only possible to the *yogin* by the successful prosecution of the discipline of *yoga*."[2] *Brahmacharya* is the starting point, but *yoga* is the means to the finality of fulfilment. Between these two poles, the ancient Hindus reared their systems of knowledge, their methods of education and their experiments in civilization.

And yet Sri Aurobindo does not say that the old Brahmacharya-Yoga Axis can be reproduced in all its details in twentieth century India. He contents himself by laying bare the "nature and psychological ideas of the old system" so that we may either re-apply them to our conditions in a modified form or perfect them even more on the basis of a "deeper psychology and a still more effective discipline."[3] But this much is certain: our educational ideas and ideals are in need of wholesale overhauling, and this we can successfully do only if we bear in mind the currents and conclusions of our traditional thought and discipline.

1. *The Brain of India*, p. 24.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

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Sri Aurobindo knew thus which items in the national life were excrescences that needed to be blotted out, and how they should be replaced by other healthy growths more suited to the genius of the nation. He knew it all very clearly, but he knew also that he could not overnight transform the grim prospect into the beautiful landscape so near his heart's desire. He could but place the ideal before the nation, and—hope; and would He not achieve the desired transformation in the fullness of time? Why then should he, Sri Aurobindo, worry?

V

Sri Aurobindo would leave the political arena soon, and all too soon; but before he actually did so, he would restate for the benefit of his more earnest countrymen the "ideal of the Karmayogin" in no uncertain terms, so that they might train themselves and be ready for the supreme ordeal whenever it should confront them. He accordingly wrote a series of ten luminous articles in his English paper, the *Karmayogin*, and these have since been reprinted, along with two of Sister Nivedita's contributions, under the title, *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*.

The message contained in this book is for all, but especially is it intended for the youth of India. Sri Aurobindo is firmly of the opinion that our salvation lies not in merely reproducing in India

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a toy model of European freedom, with its bicameral legislatures, casteless societies, utter secularism, and all-pervading materialism. Sri Aurobindo says, on the contrary, First Things First :

> "We do not believe that by changing the machinery so as to make our society the ape of Europe we shall effect social renovation. Widow-remarriage, substitution of class for caste, adult marriage, intermarriages, interdining and the other nostrums of the social reformer are mechanical changes which, whatever their merits or demerits, cannot by themselves save the soul of the nation alive or stay the course of degradation and decline. It is the spirit alone that saves, and only by becoming great and free in heart can we become socially and politically great and free."[1]

Sri Aurobindo, again, is not for multiplying new sects ; they solve nothing, but only add to our problems. Science and religion, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism have all seized the truth, some partially and others integrally ; we need not, and should not, declare war against any of these stupendous achievements of the human race. In a sense, of course, Hinduism "is the most sceptical and the most believing of all, the most sceptical because it has questioned and experimented the most, the most believing because it has the deepest experience and the most varied and positive

1. *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*, p. 7.

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spiritual knowledge,—that wider Hinduism which is not a dogma or combination of dogmas but a law of life, which is not a social frame-work but the spirit of a past and future social evolution, which rejects nothing but insists on testing and experiencing everything and when tested and experienced turning it to the soul's uses, in this Hinduism we find the basis of the future world-religion."[1] Let the Hindu, let all Indians, only recapture the inner spirit of Hinduism, its abiding spirituality ; matter need not be denied, but spirituality should be affirmed ; then all will be well.

It can never be stressed too often that, while Sri Aurobindo's vision of Aryan culture was no doubt partly recapitulatory of the remote past and revivalist in objective, it was in its general impulsion dynamic, integral and futurist. He states his position thus with perspicacity and clinching vigour :

> " It (Nationalism) must be on its guard against any tendency to cling to every detail that has been Indian. That has not been the spirit of Hinduism in the past, there is no reason why it should be so in the future. In all life there are three elements, the fixed and permanent spirit, the developing yet constant soul and the brittle changeable body. The spirit we cannot change, we can only obscure or lose ; the soul must not be rashly meddled with, must neither be tortured

1. *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*, pp. 8-9.

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into a shape alien to it, nor obstructed in its free expansion; and the body must be used as a means, not over-cherished as a thing valuable for its own sake. We will sacrifice no ancient form to an unreasoning love of change, we will keep none which the national spirit desires to replace by one that is a still better and truer expression of the undying soul of the nation."[1]

Further, Sri Aurobindo's gospel of Nationalism, aggressive and virile though it undoubtedly is in its first phase, is nowhere tainted by the virus that has made present-day totalitarianism possible in Germany and Japan. Sri Aurobindo's Nationalism is a Nationalism for enriching and extending life, not for diminishing or destroying it. Sri Aurobindo wisely points out that a nation, once it has set its own house in order both politically and spiritually, "should preserve itself in Cosmopolitanism somewhat as the individual preserves itself in the family, the family in the class, the class in the nation, not destroying itself needlessly but recognizing a larger interest."[2]

A nation, then, should be strong enough to be able to live a healthy and useful life: it should not be so strong that it inevitably starts preying upon weaker nations and even upon the weaker elements within its own boundaries. Whatever happens,

1. *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*, pp. 45-6.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

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the " god-state " should not be allowed to evolve in our midst; the so-called, but really ungodly, god-state only rises from the grave of the individual. But Sri Aurobindo would rather emphasize the " greatness of the individual." And yet even the greatest of individuals are but instruments in the hands of the Divine—of, if you will, the *Zeit Geist*. Truly did Carlyle point out that " great men are the inspired (speaking and acting) Texts of that divine Book of Revelations, whereof a Chapter is completed from epoch to epoch, and by some named history." Men in themselves are but helpless thistle-downs, swaying to and fro as the vagrant breeze intermittently disturbs them; they are great only to the extent the *Zeit Geist* or the terrific energy of Mahakali informs and inspires them, and carries them onward by the great momentum of its own impulsion. In other words, " the greatness of individuals is the greatness of the eternal Energy within."[1]

What should be the ideal of the Karmayogin, then? Yoga " is communion with God for knowledge, for love or for work."[2] In Karmayoga, man apprehends God's purposes and lets Him make use of his frail body for achieving His own aims. As Sri Aurobindo puts it beautifully:

" The Charioteer of Kurukshetra driving the car of Arjuna over that field of ruin is the image

1. *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*, p. 105.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

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and description of Karmayoga: for the body is the chariot and the senses are the horses of the driving and it is through the blood-stained and mire-sunk ways of the world that Sri Krishna pilots the soul of man to Vaicuntha."[1]

The Karmayogin should perfect his own instrument and leave it in the hands of God. To-day a wise passivity may be the proper thing to preserve, to-morrow one may be required to go through fire and brimstone; in either case, the Karmayogin will be ready; the spirit within him will tell him what he should do, and will also give him the strength to do it.

No doubt, if all and sundry begin talking about "inner voices" and proclaiming themselves to be the agents of the Divine, ordinary life would grow quickly untenable. Sri Aurobindo therefore says that, not everybody, but only the man who has gone through the austere discipline of *yoga* and has communed with the Divine, can thus interpret His purposes and translate them into action. Everybody is, of course, potentially a great Karmayogin; but few amongst us actually realize our great potentialities,—and the more is the pity! Once, however, individual man has truly realized that he is an heir to immortality and an agent of the Divine, he is an irresistible leader of men; he is irresistible because he is guided by a Power which no other

1. *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*, pp. 22-3.

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merely human agency can stand against; he is irresistible, being in himself the arm of the eternal Consciousness-Force. He, the great Karmayogin, is in fact God manifesting Himself to average humanity; he has caught a glimpse of Infinity and seen in it both the auspicious God and the terrible God, and seen them too as the One final Reality :

> The God of Wrath, the God of Love are one,
> Nor least He loves when most He smites. Alone
> Who rises above fear and plays with grief,
> Defeat and death, inherits full relief
> From blindness and beholds the single Form,
> Love masking Terror, Peace supporting storm.
> The Friend of Man helps him with Life and Death,
> Until he knows. Then freed from mortal breath
> He feels the joy of the immortal play;
> Grief, pain, resentment, terror pass away.
> He too grows Rudra fierce, august and dire,
> And Shiva, sweet fulfiller of desire.[1]

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 129.

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Part III

PILGRIM OF ETERNITY

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CHAPTER TWELVE

PONDICHERRY

I

Ever since his acquittal in the Alipur case, Sri Aurobindo had repeated intimations from divers sources that he was a " marked " man—" marked," shall we say, in the Note-Books of the Government ! Once before—twice before—he had been prosecuted without a " scrap of reliable evidence"; he had been acquitted, on both occasions, but the acquittal was no security " either against the trumping up of a fresh accusation or the arbitrary law of deportation which dispenses with the inconvenient formality of a charge and the still more inconvenient necessity of producing evidence."[1]

Sometime in June-July 1909, rumour was " strong that a case for my (Sri Aurobindo's) deportation has been submitted to the Government by the Calcutta police."[2] A third time he might be prosecuted, or now he might be even deported ! Under the circumstances—the precarious circumstance of his being unsure of the morrow—Sri Aurobindo decided

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 223.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

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to publish in his paper his " Open Letter to My Countrymen," to which a reference has already been made in the previous chapter ; this letter was to serve the double purpose of clarifying the political situation of the day and suggesting a programme of action for the immediate future.

In the letter Sri Aurobindo advisedly used expressions like " in case of my deportation " .... " if I do not return from it," thereby indicating his partial or veiled prevision of the shape of things to come. The " Open Letter " was to stand, said Sri Aurobindo, as his " last political will and testament to his countrymen."[1] The Nationalist party need not be depressed if a particular leader is jailed or deported. The god-anointed leader will come....sooner or later :

> " All great movements wait for their God-sent leader, the willing channel of His force, and only when he comes, move forward triumphantly to their fulfilment. The men who have led hitherto have been strong men of high gifts and commanding genius, great enough to be the protagonists of any other movement, but even they were not sufficient.... Therefore, the Nationalist party, the custodians of the future, must wait for the man who is to come...."[2]

And yet Sri Aurobindo did not take the final

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 225.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 225-6.

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decision to retire from politics ; weeks passed, and months passed ; he was using the *Karmayogin* as a mouthpiece for the utterance of his Prophecy, he was placing before its readers both a vision of the future and a programme of action that will lead the nation to the shrine of fulfilment. In December 1909,—as late as that !—Sri Aurobindo made this exhortation to his countrymen in the course of a prolegomenon to a bold programme of action :

> " Let us then take up the work God has given us, like courageous, steadfast and patriotic men, willing to sacrifice greatly and venture greatly, because the mission also is great."

But it was destined otherwise. In the issue of the *Karmayogin*, dated January 22, 1910, we learn that Sri Aurobindo had received an anonymous letter " giving him the momentous information that a certain Gopal Chandra Ray of the C.I.D., with several assistants, is busy watching 6, College Square, and the Post Office, and copying all the letters and postcards that came in his name without exception." On January 24th, a Bengali youth shot dead in broad daylight, in the premises of the Calcutta High Court, Mr. Shamsul-ul-la, a Deputy Superintendent of Police. In the issue of the 5th February, Sri Aurobindo commented on the shooting outrage and explained the Nationalist Party's future course of action. Terrorist outrages were doubtless on the increase, and for this the Government had only to thank themselves ; the wind of

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repression was yielding the fruit—the poisonous fruit—of the whirlwind of raging terrorism. The Nationalists were powerless to stem the rising gale of terrorism then sweeping over Bengal; they could only suspend their own even strictly lawful and peaceful political activities, hoping that the Government will be thereby able to put an early end to the wave of terrorism.

The Nationalist Party was to suspend its political activities; and they were to wait for the advent of the chosen leader of God. As for himself, Sri Aurobindo would remove himself, at any rate for a time, from the scene of his public activities. He would retire into himself, envelop himself in a vast quietude, and seek the Truth!

Towards the close of February, Sri Aurobindo took the final decision to retire from Calcutta to the neighbouring French territory of Chandernagore. It was hardly ten months after his release from the Alipur prison; he now went into a "prison" of his own forging—

> Upon Truth's solid rock there stands
> A thin-walled ivory tower,
> Built light but strong by fairy hands
> With thought's creative power.[1]

For about a month, Sri Aurobindo stayed secretly in Chandernagore and intently, though silently, pursued

1. S. R. Dongerkery, *The Ivory Tower*, p. 114.

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the *sadhana* of Yoga. But Chandernagore was dangerously near Calcutta, the storm-centre of the Indian political world of those days; and hence Sri Aurobindo decided to seek a more secluded spot for continuing his spiritual work. He therefore left Chandernagore also, and reached Pondicherry, another French possession, on the 4th April 1910. He first stayed with Sankara Chetty, but later on moved to his own quarters in the "White Town" and soon completely surrendered himself to Yoga.

Meanwhile, the muddle-headed authorities had launched a third prosecution against Sri Aurobindo, on account of his "Open Letter" to his countrymen that had been published in the *Karmayogin* over eight months ago! It had taken the authorities such an unconscionably long time to make up their minds whether the "Open Letter" was or was not seditious. The Government surpassed themselves by alleging that Sri Aurobindo had made a precipitate flight in order to escape arrest. Sri Aurobindo, on his part, issued a statement through the columns of the *Madras Times* fully explaining his position. Sri Aurobindo had not sought to avoid the long arm of the law; he had only retired to Pondicherry in answer to an imperative inner need to pursue the path of Yoga; the warrant for his arrest had been issued *after* he had already reached Pondicherry; he was therefore not obliged to appear before a British Indian court of justice.

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The prosecution, on their part, were quite equal to the occasion. They pressed the case (learning, presumably, the wrong side of the lesson of the first *Bandemataram* case) against the unfortunate printer of the *Karmayogin*. The case went against the printer in the lower court; but the printer appealed against the decision to the High Court, where Mr. Justice Woodroffe and Mr. Justice Fletcher quashed the conviction of the lower court and gave the decision that Sri Aurobindo's "Open Letter" was *not* seditious. Thus, "for the third time a prosecution against him had failed!"[1]

It appears that in the beginning Sri Aurobindo had entertained the idea of returning to the political fray under more favourable circumstances and with a better knowledge of the art of purposeful leadership. By and by, however, he fully realized that his destiny was to make spiritual, rather than political or material, conquests. Hence he decided at last to sever his connection altogether from the currents and cross-currents of Indian politics and to devote himself exclusively to *yogic sadhana*.

II

We have seen how Sri Aurobindo was interested in Yoga during the latter part of the Baroda period. What attracted him to Yoga then? He had spent

1. *Sri Aurobindo : a Life Sketch*, p. 11.

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fourteen years in a foreign country and he had been both amused and edified by the civilization of the West ; but in the end he had found it insufficient. Western civilization flamed forth, indeed, on many sides, at once brilliantly alluring and scorchingly devastating ; but wasn't the central core itself a darkness, rather than a source of Light ? What shall it profit man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul !

Sri Aurobindo had acquired a measure of intellectual competency and even eminence as a result of his prolonged stay in England ; but that was not enough. Returning to India, he ever kept in his mind the ideal of service to the Motherland,—to the great Mother,—watched the procession of events with absorbing earnestness, and began preparing forces so that he could act when the right moment came. His first organized work in politics was in the nature of grouping people who accepted the idea of national independence and were prepared to take up an appropriate and adequate action ; although this was undertaken at an early age, it took a regular shape, as we saw, in or about 1902. Two years later he turned to Yoga—not, indeed, to clarify his ideas in political matters—but to find the spiritual strength which would support him, enlighten his way, and perfect the hidden instrument within. Sri Aurobindo himself thus explained in the Uttarpara Speech the reasons that first attracted him to Yoga :

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"When I approached God at that time, I hardly had a living faith in Him. The agnostic was in me, the atheist was in me, the sceptic was in me and I was not absolutely sure that there was a God at all. I did not feel His presence. Yet something drew me to the truth of the Vedas, the truth of the Gita, the truth of the Hindu religion. I felt there must be a mighty truth somewhere in this Yoga, a mighty truth in this religion based on the Vedanta."[1]

And Sri Aurobindo wished to wrest that truth somehow,—but not for a selfish reason! He did not "ask for *mukti*," personal salvation; he did not desire power or success or fame for himself; he rather prayed fervently to God:

"If Thou art, then Thou knowest my heart.. I do not ask for anything that others ask for. I ask only for strength to uplift this nation, I ask only to be allowed to live and work for this people whom I love and to whom I pray that I may devote my life."[2]

Yes, for himself he wanted nothing; he had always in him a considerable equanimity, a natural imperturbability, in the face of the world and its difficulties; and, after some inward depression in his adolescence (not due to any outward circumstances, nor yet amounting to sorrow or melancholy, but

1. *Speeches of Aurobindo Ghose*, p. 101.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 101-2.

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merely a strain in the temperament), this mood of equanimity became fairly settled. His great passion was "work"—work for the country, for the world, finally for the Divine, and always *nishkama karma*. During the Baroda period and immediately afterwards, it was "work" for the country, for the Mother. Such partial realization as he was then able to achieve through the earnestness and constancy of his *sadhana* only reinforced his faith in Yoga as the cure for the ills of the world, and of India in particular.

III

When Sri Aurobindo left Baroda and plunged himself deep into politics, his preoccupation with Yoga remained. He had had, no doubt, spiritual experiences from the time he stepped on the Indian soil; a vast calm descended upon him with his first step on the Apollo Bunder in Bombay, his first recontact with the soil and spirit of India; and this calm surrounded him and remained with him for long months afterwards. Again, while walking on the ridge of the Takht-i-Sulemani in Kashmir, the realization of the vacant Infinite came upon him, unbidden as it were; the living presence of Kali in the shrine on the banks of the Narmada came upon him unawares and filled him with its stupendous majesty; and he had, on another occasion, when he was in danger of a carriage accident in Baroda in the first year of his stay there, a vision of the God-

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head surging up from within him and mastering and controlling with its gaze all events and surroundings. But these and others like these were inner experiences coming of themselves, with a sudden unexpectedness, and were hence not the clear results of a Yogic sadhana. When he did begin practising Yoga, he did so by himself without a Guru, getting the rule from a friend who was a disciple of Brahmananda of the Gaya Math; it was confined at first to assiduous practice of Pranayama, and at one time Sri Aurobindo did Pranayama for six hours or more a day. There was no conflict or wavering between Yoga and politics; when he started Yoga, he carried on both without any idea of opposition between them. He nevertheless wanted to find a Guru, a teacher who would be able to tell him how to proceed in his endeavour to wrest the ultimate secret of knowledge and power from Nature and God. He established some connection with a member of the Governing Body of the Naga Sunnyasis. The Naga Sunnyasi confirmed Sri Aurobindo's faith in Yoga by curing Barindra in almost a moment of a violent and clinging hill fever by merely cutting through a glassful of water crosswise with a knife and repeating a silent mantra; Barindra drank the water and was instantly cured of the malady. Although the Naga Sunnyasi gave Sri Aurobindo a *stotra* of Kali and conducted certain *kriyas* and a Vedic *yajna*, all this was for his success in politics and not for Yoga, and Sri

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Aurobindo did not accept the Naga Sunnyasi as his Guru. Sri Aurobindo likewise also met Brahmananda and was greatly impressed by him ; but he had no real helper or Guru in Yoga till he met Lele, and that too was only for a short time. We have already explained in an earlier chapter the nature of the advice tendered by Lele and the first results of Sri Aurobindo's putting it into practice. When Sri Aurobindo was leaving Bombay for Calcutta, he asked Lele how he was to get instructions for Sadhana in his absence; Lele after a little thought asked him whether he could surrender himself entirely to the inner Guide within him, and move as it moved him ; if so, Sri Aurobindo needed no instructions from Lele or anybody else. This Sri Aurobindo accepted and made that his rule of sadhana and of life.

And yet the whirl of politics and political journalism cannot constitute an ideal background for Yogic sadhana. But Sri Krishna intervened at last ; and the Muzzaferpore outrage and the subsequent incarceration of Sri Aurobindo proved indeed a blessing in disguise to him.

A year's seclusion and meditation in the Alipur jail no doubt worked a great transformation in Sri Aurobindo. His horizon widened, he was able to discover behind Mother India Vasudeva Himself, the Divine immanent in all. He had as a rule never brought any rancour into his politics ; he never had any hatred for England or the English

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people; he had always based his claim for freedom for India on the inherent right to freedom, not on any charge of misgovernment or oppression; and if ever he attacked persons, attacked even violently, it was for their views on political action, not for any other motive. As a result of his prison experiences, Sri Aurobindo was now able to see that Sanatana Dharma both included and transcended the baffling vicissitudes of political action. Once again—now as always—*nishkama karma* was the watchword that spurred him to action. But he decided that first he would follow the path of Yoga—follow it whithersoever it might lead him—so that he might gain perfect control over the instrument of purposive action lodged deep and veiled within himself. A Rishi Viswamitra is said to have created a whole new world so that King Trishuncou could sing thus his Hymn of Triumph:

I shall not die.
Although this body, when the spirit tires
Of its cramped residence, shall feed the fires,
My house consumes, not I.....

I hold the sky
Together and upbear the teeming earth.
I was the eternal thinker at my birth
And shall be, though I die.[1]

Could not he, Sri Aurobindo, attempt—so to say—a repetition of the feat? As he confessed to Dilip

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, p. 140.

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Kumar Roy :

"I too wanted at one time to transform through my Yoga the face of the world. I had wanted to change the fundamental nature and movements of humanity, to exile all the evils which affect mortality.... It was with this aim and outlook that I turned to Yoga in the beginning, and I came to Pondicherry because I had been directed by the Voice to pursue my Yoga here."[1]

IV

We do not know what exactly happened to Sri Aurobindo in the process of Yoga during the first four years of his retirement in Pondicherry. All that we are permitted to know is that this was a period of "silent yoga." The fever-paroxysms and the incessant rattle and drive of a combative political life were now left far behind. Sri Aurobindo had parted from his wife, his friends, his colleagues, and the very scene of his recent fruitful activities ; he had, in short, stripped the Self of its clinging clothes of mere ego-stuff and made it "lone, limitless, nude, immune."[2]

But that was only the beginning. Although the personal problem was in a sense already solved, the infinitely more stupendous human problem yet

1. *Tirthankar* ; the quotation is extracted from Dilip's own English rendering of the account of his interview with Sri Aurobindo.

2. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 300.

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remained. Could he do nothing to bring about "a new Heaven and a new Earth" in our midst? Having already long outgrown Yogi Lele's instructions, Sri Aurobindo now experimented earnestly and incessantly in the delectable laboratory of his soul; he bravely adventured on his own, following the divine guidance within him and—in the appointed time—he apprehended all that was to be apprehended, saw very Infinity face to face. He had gone beyond his first experience in Baroda and Bombay described by him in his poem, *Nirvana*. He could say at that time in the strength of his soul's vision:

Only the illimitable Permanent
Is here. A peace stupendous, featureless, still
Replaces all,—what once was I, in it
A silent unnamed emptiness content
Either to fade in the Unknowable
Or thrill with the luminous seas of the Infinite.[1]

He had now covered a vaster field of experience both positive and negative and passed beyond both to the Supreme Truth reconciling them.

Sri Aurobindo had, in the light of his own Yogic experiences, invented a new instrument, at once so delicate and so all-powerful; he had developed the spiritual technique of *purna* Yoga or "integral" Yoga, comprehending, harmonizing, and transcending the two great categories of experience,

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 298.

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Matter and Spirit, and the three great classical high roads to salvation, *Jnana*, *Karma* and *Bhakti*.

It was a significant victory, no doubt; but the victory was also tinged with a huge disappointment. As he said to Dilip Kumar Roy:

> "It was then (*i.e.*, after my own *atma-siddhi*) that my outlook changed with the knowledge born of my new Yogic consciousness. But then I found, to my utter disillusionment, that it was only my ignorance which had led me to think that the impossible was feasible here and now..... in order to help humanity out, it was not enough for an individual, however great, to achieve an ultimate solution individually; humanity has to be ripe for it too."[1]

If this realization of his powerlessness to alter the face of the world with a mere flourish of his Yogic wand did indeed disillusion him, it at least clearly enough indicated the line of action he should henceforth pursue. He would not attempt the establishment of a Golden Age, a Satya Yuga, "a new Heaven and a new Earth," all at once; however much such a consummation is a thing to be devoutly wished, it was also a sheer impossibility; the utmost that Sri Aurobindo could do was to convey to others, however partially and fitfully, the light of his own unique realizations and his hopes for the supramentalization of human nature

1. Dilip, *Tirthankar*.

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and of all terrestrial existence. Perhaps, some at least would hearken and respond to the pæan of joy and the song of hope, and join Sri Aurobindo in establishing conditions favourable enough for the descent and acceptance of the Supramental Light. Meanwhile, having gathered knowledge "there," Sri Aurobindo will descend to his "human frame," live and move and have his being with the men of this unredeemed world, choosing his instruments, planning the future,

> Testing, rejecting, and confirming souls—
> Vessels of the Spirit ; for the golden age
> In Kali comes, the iron lined with gold,
> The Yoga shall be given back to men,
> The sects shall cease, the grim debates die out
> And atheism perish from the Earth,
> Blasted with knowledge, love and brotherhood
> And wisdom repossess Sri Krishna's world.[1]

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 140.

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Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ARYA

I

After four years of silent Yoga, Sri Aurobindo decided to run a philosophical journal from Pondicherry. Fate had just then brought him into contact with a remarkable Frenchman by name Paul Richard and she who is now known as the Mother. They had for years been in search of a Master in whom they could recognize a World Teacher, they had sought him in the West and in the East, and they found him at last in the person of Sri Aurobindo. As M. Richard said later to a Japanese audience :

> " The hour is coming of great things, of great events, and also of great men, the divine men of Asia. All my life I have sought for them across the world, for all my life I have felt they must exist somewhere in the world, that this world would die if they did not live. For they are its light, its heat, its life. It is in Asia that I found the greatest amongst them—the leader, the hero of tomorrow. He is a Hindu. His name is Aurobindo Ghose."[1]

1. *Dawn over Asia.*

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The Mother, who had already gone far in spiritual realization and occult wisdom and experience, was no less overwhelmed by this vision—this reality—of the New Man. All three decided to make the new magazine their principal means of reaching to the outer world. At the beginning they published an English journal, *Arya*, and a French journal, *Revue de Grande Synthèse*, the French edition being for the most part a translation of the English edition. Unluckily, the inauguration of the *Arya* and its French counterpart synchronized with World War I. The French edition was therefore discontinued after the first seven issues. *Arya*, however, was published for nearly seven years, commencing on Sri Aurobindo's forty-third birthday and ceasing publication in 1921.

Arya and *Revue de Grande Synthèse* were in the main philosophical journals. Edited by Sri Aurobindo, in collaboration with M. Richard and the Mother, *Arya* placed before itself a two-fold object :

"1. A systematic study of the highest problems of existence ;

2. The formation of a vast synthesis of knowledge, harmonizing the divers religious traditions of humanity, occidental as well as oriental. Its method will be that of a realism, at once rational and transcendental, a realism consisting in the unification of intellectual and scientific disciplines with those of intuitive experience."[1]

1. *Arya*, advertisement on the cover page.

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It promised to its subscribers studies in speculative philosophy, translations of ancient texts and commentaries on them, essays in comparative religion, and practical suggestions regarding " inner culture and self-development."[1] More particularly, it explained its " ideal " in the following words :

> " unity for the human race by an inner oneness and not only by an external association of interests ; the resurgence of man out of the merely animal and economic life or the merely intellectual and æsthetic into the glories of the spiritual existence ; the pouring of the power of the spirit into the physical mould and mental instrument so that man may develop his manhood into that true Supermanhood which shall exceed our present state as much as this exceeds the animal state from which Science tells us that we have issued. These three are one ; for man's unity and man's self-transcendence can come only by living in the spirit."[2]

The principal contributor to *Arya* was Sri Aurobindo. No doubt, M. Richard's *Eternal Wisdom* and *The Wherefore of the Worlds*—both published serially—were interesting sequences ; but it is no derogation to the other very occasional contributors to say that Sri Aurobindo was, as a matter of pure fact, the heart and soul and brain

1. *Arya*, advertisement on the cover page.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 9.

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of the *Arya*. Without him and his many luminous and voluminous, varied and weighty contributions, *Arya* must have had the look of *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark.

At the very outset, Sri Aurobindo sketched out a number of massive sequences and he permitted each monthly paper boat to carry to its customers, near or far, its welcome load of philosophy, social and literary criticism, exegesis, wisdom, poetry and prophecy. There has been no other magazine quite like it in all the long and diverting history of journalism, in this or any other country. It was truly a "one-man show," as was the *Prabuddha Bharata*, during the first few months of its existence, under the editorship of that brilliant writer and precocious Yogi, the late B. R. Rajam Iyer. *Arya*, then, was a "one-man show"; but the man was Sri Aurobindo and that gave *Arya*—and gives it even now, although it was discontinued over twenty years ago—a permanent niche in the temple of fame.

II

Why did Sri Aurobindo call his journal "Arya"? Could he have had a sense of racial superiority,—*à la* Hitler and the loud protagonists of the Blonde Beast of the Nordic race? An impossible thought! Sri Aurobindo has beautifully and convincingly explained the term:

"Intrinsically, in its most fundamental sense,

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> Arya means an effort or an uprising and overcoming. The Aryan is he who strives and overcomes all outside him and within him that stands opposed to the human advance. Self-conquest is the first law of his nature.... For in everything he seeks truth, in everything right, in everything height and freedom.....
>
> Self-perfection is the aim of his self-conquest. Therefore what he conquers he does not destroy, but ennobles and fulfils....always the Aryan is a worker and warrior. He spares himself no labour of mind or body, whether to seek the Highest or to serve it. He avoids no difficulty, he accepts no cessation from fatigue. Always he fights for the coming of that kingdom within himself and in the world."[1]

The word "Arya" thus connotes certain qualities of "head" and "heart," certain aptitudes and aspirations, and has no reference whatsoever to race. An austere and uncompromising aspiration and a stern and determined endeavour alone mark the true Aryan; and when the Aryan, after his trials and tribulations, reaches at last the sanctuary of success, he becomes the perfected Aryan, the "Arhat"; he has attained fulfilment in the three rungs of the ascending spiral of consciousness,—the individual, the cosmic-universal, and the transcendent. "The perfect Arhat is he," says Sri

1. *Views and Reviews*, pp. 9-11.

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Aurobindo, "who is able to live simultaneously in all these three apparent states of existence, elevate the lower into the higher, receive the higher into the lower, so that he may represent perfectly in the symbols of the world that with which he is identified in all parts of his being,—the triple and triune Brahman."[1]

That being the description of the Arhat, he is potentially lodged as much within an Asiatic as a Westerner, as much within a Bengali or Tamil or Gujarati Hindu as a French or American or Australian lady. If Sri Aurobindo conceives of the Arhat, the completed Aryan, as being rather akin to the "Jivanmukta":

> Although consenting here to a mortal body,
> He is the Undying; limit and bond he knows not;
> For him the æons are a playground,
> Life and its deeds are his splendid shadow;[2]

the Mother thus explains the evolutionary process that transforms mere man into the ideal of his fervent imaginations:

> "All principle of individuality is overpassed, she (Nature) is plunged in Thy infinity that allows oneness to be realized in all domains without confusion, without disorder. The combined harmony of that which persists, that which progresses and that which eternally is, is little

1. *Views and Reviews*, p. 12.
2. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 286.

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by little accomplished in an always more complex, more extended and more lofty equilibrium. And this interchange of the three modes of life allows the plenitude of the manifestation."[1]

This is the goal that *Arya* set before all men and women ; and it was the aim of the journal to persuade and convert all to its way of thought and life, to make all see in the "Aryan Path" the true and sole means of self-realization and purposive, fruitful and noble endeavour.

III

The major sequences in *Arya* were, respectively, *The Life Divine, The Secret of the Veda, Essays on the Gita, The Psychology of Social Development, The Ideal of Human Unity, The Future Poetry, A Defence of Indian Culture*, and, the longest and in some respects the most ambitious of them all, *The Synthesis of Yoga*. These are giant thought-structures, reared on a foundation of spiritual experience or intuitive thought and realized in all their solidity and beauty by the magic wand of Sri Aurobindo's prose style. Of these superb sequences, only *The Life Divine* and *Essays on the Gita* are now available in book form.

The minor sequences included commentaries on *Isha* and *Kena Upanishads, The Hymns of the*

1. *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 60 ; and *Prières et Méditations*, p. 322.

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Atris, and *Heraclitus*, *The Renaissance in India*, *A Rationalistic Critic on Indian Culture*, and *Is India Civilized*, the last four being reviews or extended reviews. Of these, again, *Isha Upanishad*, *Heraclitus* and *The Renaissance in India* have been issued in book form. Various other contributions to the pages of the *Arya* are also now issued in booklet form—*Ideal and Progress*, *The Superman*, *Evolution*, *Views and Reviews*, and *Thoughts and Glimpses*. But by far the major portion of Sri Aurobindo's contributions to the *Arya* has not been republished in a handy form. Translations, reviews, aphorisms and epigrams, miscellaneous essays, comments on the progress of the war or on the prospects of perpetual peace, discussions on materialism and self-determination, discourses on the Reincarnating Soul and the Ascending Unity, notices of books and journals, appreciations of poetry and Art,—these too are scattered in princely profusion in the garden of the *Arya*.

In this and the subsequent sections we shall glance at some of these minor sequences and other individual contributions to the *Arya*.[1] One of the most interesting and thoughtful of these minor sequences is *The Renaissance in India*, which consists of four chapters initially suggested by Dr. James H. Cousins's book on the subject. As in *The Future Poetry* also, Dr. Cousins's book is merely

1. The major sequences are discussed in the subsequent chapters.

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the starting point ; the rest is drawn from Sri Aurobindo's own intuitive grasp of the fundamentals of Indian culture.

The four essays that constitute this illuminating study briefly discuss, firstly, the causes of the decadence of yesterday, secondly, the " indeterminate confusion of present tendencies and first efforts,"[1] and, thirdly, the possibilities of tomorrow. Unlike many others, Sri Aurobindo does not think that India has deteriorated because of too much religion. In India religion has meant more to the people than what it has meant to the Westerners ; in fact, there is no exact synonym for the word " religion " in Sanskrit. If, however, argues Sri Aurobindo, " we give rather to religion the sense of the following of the spiritual impulse in its fullness and define spirituality as the attempt to know and live in the highest self, the divine, the all-embracing unity and to raise life in all its parts to the divinest possible values, then it is evident that there was not too much of religion, but rather too little of it—and in what there was, a too one-sided and therefore insufficiently ample tendency. The right remedy is, not to belittle still farther the agelong ideal of India, but to return to its old amplitude and give it a still wider scope, to make in very truth all the life of the nation a religion in this high spiritual sense."[2]

1. *The Renaissance in India*, p. 49.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 89 ; see also Nolini Kanta Gupta's *The Malady of the Century*, pp. 44-50.

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Another very informative and most stimulating book is Sri Aurobindo's *Heraclitus*. It too started as a review—a review of Prof. R. D. Ranade's paper on the philosophy of Heraclitus—and grew ultimately into a brochure of packed wisdom and critical insight. A diligent and enthusiastic student of Greek thought and literature, Sri Aurobindo is particularly fitted to interpret Heraclitus to present-day Indians. Heraclitus no doubt discussed the very same questions that the ancient Indian thinkers also discussed; the lines of his reasoning were often unexpectedly the same as those that Vedic and Vedantic seers had pursued in some of their boldest adventures and loftiest flights; even the conclusions sometimes reveal a cousin-brotherly relationship, thereby indicating a surprising enough kinship between the higher reaches of Greek and Indian thought respectively.

Sri Aurobindo maintains that Heraclitus was more than a mere maker of aphorisms and thought-soaked epigrams; "though no partaker in or supporter of any kind of rites or mummery, Heraclitus still strikes one as at least an intellectual child of the Mystics and of Mysticism, although perhaps a rebel son in the house of his mother. He has something of the mystic style, something of the intuitive Appollonian inlook into the secrets of existence."[1] Not caring to reduce his ideas

1. *Heraclitus*, p. 4.

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into a system, Heraclitus only threw out pregnant suggestions here and there,—suggestions often expressed in a language that was as much of a riddle as the general riddle of the universe itself and its infinitely varied and seemingly baffling dichotomies. But Sri Aurobindo thinks that perhaps Heraclitus, as did the Vedic and Vedantic seers as well, located Reality at a *being* as also in a *becoming*, that he did, however dimly, posit the theory of *pralaya*, not far different from the "Puranic conflagration of the world by the appearance of the twelve suns, the Vedantic theory of the eternal cycles of manifestation and withdrawal from manifestation."[1]

And yet Heraclitus' is not a full and final revelation; his X-raying intelligence, lucid and powerful, discovered and exposed to human apprehension two of the basic principles of existence,—universal reason and universal force; but the third constituent of the triune ultimate Reality escaped Heraclitus, as it has escaped most occidental thinkers and philosophers. Indian thought, however, knew of "a third aspect of the Self and of Brahman; besides the universal consciousness active in divine knowledge, besides the universal force active in divine will, it saw the universal delight active in divine love and joy."[2] And—did Heraclitus see something even of this, a ripple of the divine *Ananda*,

1. *Heraclitus*, p. 32.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

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as he saw it manifest in the ineffable kingdom of the child? Perhaps; and there Sri Aurobindo appropriately leaves Heraclitus.

IV

A Defence of Indian Culture is a much longer sequence than either *The Renaissance in India* or *Heraclitus*. It started as a critical review of Mr. Archer's strictures on Indian Culture; but, after the first few instalments, the name of the series was changed from "A Rationalistic Critic on Indian Culture" into *A Defence of Indian Culture*, a detailed and splendid apologia in over twenty chapters. Mr. Archer had pointed out that "India has no spirituality"; and Sri Aurobindo rightly interjects, —"a portentous discovery!" It would seem, according to this "rationalistic critic," that India has succeeded "in killing the germs of all sane and virile spirituality": Sri Aurobindo's appropriate comment is:

> "The calm and compassion of Buddha victorious over suffering, the meditation of the thinker tranced in communion with the Eternal, passed above the seekings of thought into identity with the supreme light of the Spirit, the rapture of the saint made one by love in the pure heart with the transcendent and universal Love, the will of the Karmayogin raised above egoistic desire and passion into the impersonality of the

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divine and universal will, these things on which India has set the highest value and which have been the supreme endeavour of her greatest spirits, are not sane, are not virile![1]"

That is the charge,—a charge as absurd as saying that the Pacific is not broad and deep enough or that the Himalayas are not massive and high enough. Sri Aurobindo easily and convincingly turns the tables on the confounded Mr. William Archer; and, on the positive side, Sri Aurobindo enables the reader to take a peep into the true inwardness of Indian culture and helps him to grasp the core of authentic—"sane and virile"—spirituality in the abiding monuments of Indian culture. Especially is Sri Aurobindo's appreciation and eloquent defence of Indian Art valuable to us, since we are often apt to be led away by the Archer-like fulminations of most Western, and even some present-day Indian, detractors of our artistic heritage. The gravamen of the charge is that Indian Art is not "realistic." What do these ancient sculptors and painters mean by giving us images and pictures of men with four hands and three heads and a middle eye and an unbeautiful projection from the nipple,—all totally unknown to even the expertest students of human anatomy? Are we to look upon them, in accordance with arrogant Western opinion, "as undeveloped, in-

1. *Arya*, V, pp. 545-6.

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ferior art or even a mass of monstrous and abortive miscreation ?"[1]

Let us be done with this self-derogation and inferiority complex, says Sri Aurobindo; let us free ourselves from the dead-weight of foreign standards, let us rather look at our architecture and our painting and our sculpture, our arts of dance and music, in the light of their own "profound intention and greatness of spirit. When we so look at it, we shall be able to see that the sculpture of ancient and mediæval India claims its place on the very highest levels of artistic achievement."[2] And so also with the other Fine Arts that flourished in ancient India. Sri Aurobindo snappingly remarks that "art is not anatomy, nor an artistic masterpiece necessarily a reproduction of physical fact or a lesson in natural science."[3] Art may be realistic, even crudely naturalistic; it may be impressionistic; it may be shot through and through by symbolism; Realistic or Naturalistic Art, Impressionistic or Cubist Art, they are all valid renderings of Reality, truthful enough all of them, though not all truthful to an equal extent. "Art has flowed," says Sri Aurobindo elsewhere, "in two separate streams in Europe and Asia"; while the best European Art satisfies "the physical

1. *Arya*, VI, p. 483.
2. *Ibid.*, VI, p. 484.
3. *Ibid.*, VI, p. 494.

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requirements of the æsthetic sense, the laws of formal beauty, the emotional demand of humanity, the portrayal of life and outward reality," the best Indian Art reaches "beyond them and expresses inner spiritual truth, the deeper not obvious reality of things, the joy of God in the world and its beauty and desirableness and the manifestation of divine force and energy in phenomenal creation."[1] Indian Art—at least the best of it—has had always its origin from the utmost depths of the human soul, and then only rose to the levels of the heart and the mind, to gather itself at last into a radiant, if not a rounded, perfection rendered in terms of sound and rhythm and form and colour. As it originated in the human soul, its appeal also is, not to the rational constituent of man, but to the deeper, truer, psychic constituent.

While reviewing Gangoly's *South Indian Bronzes*, Sri Aurobindo pertinently remarked with reference to Indian Art:

> "....always one has to look not at the form, but through and into it to see that which has seized and informed it. The appeal of this art is in fact to the human soul for communion with the divine Soul and not merely to the understanding, the imagination and the sensuous eye. It is a sacred and hieratic art, expressive of the profound thought of Indian philosophy and the

1. *The National Value of Art*, pp. 46-7.

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deep passion of Indian worship. It seeks to render to the soul that can feel and the eye that can see the extreme values of the suprasensuous."[1] If, then, the aim that the Indian artist sets before himself was a highly laudable one and if, further, he has been able to realize his artistic aims again and again with a marvellous and perennial force, no other considerations should stand in the way of our recognizing and appreciating both the inspiration and the achievements of the great Arts of India. After all, Indian culture is *ours*, and it is the genuine article; its spirituality, far from drying up the foundations of life, only helped the full flowering of Indian life, and it ever acted as "the most powerful force for the many-sided development of the human race."[2]

Even so, Sri Aurobindo is no mere partisan of Indian Culture. He is amazingly clear-eyed in his perception of the strong and weak points of the different civilizations of the world; he judges with knowledge and impartiality, he differentiates with subtlety and lucidity, and he prognosticates with vision and clarity. In just a couple of sentences, Sri Aurobindo spans the past, the present and the future, and gives us a miniature history of human civilization, indicating the triumphs of the past as also the hopes of the future:

1. *Views and Reviews*, p. 53.
2. *Arya*, VI, p. 561.

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"Greece developed to a high degree the intellectual reason and the sense of form and harmonious beauty, Rome founded firmly strength and power and patriotism and law and order, modern Europe has raised to enormous proportions practical reason, science and efficiency and economic capacity, India developed the spiritual mind working on the other powers of man and exceeding them, the intuitive reason, the philosophical harmony of the Dharma informed by the religious spirit, the sense of the eternal and the infinite. The future has to go on to a greater and more perfect comprehensive development of these things and to evolve fresh powers...."[1]

V

While the *Arya* was in the main a "Philosophical Review," it nevertheless occasionally glanced at the contemporary political scene. It is true that Sri Aurobindo had retired from active politics; but it was this very circumstance that enabled him to survey the world crisis created by World War I from the vantage ground of the sublime aloofness and steady wisdom of the Seer. The life of the *Arya* was almost exactly contemporaneous with the course of the War and its Aftermath; and no wonder the War and the Peace were the subjects

1. *Arya*, VI, pp. 224-5.

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of some of Sri Aurobindo's most trenchant and prophetic utterances.

When, after four terribly sanguinary years of total warfare, the Armistice was signed at last, Sri Aurobindo wrote in the *Arya* in December 1918 under the heading, "At the end of the War":

> "It is the wrath of Rudra that has swept over the earth and the track of his footprints can be seen in these ruins. There has come as a result upon the race the sense of having lived in many falsehoods and the need of building according to an ideal. Therefore we have now to meet the question of the Master of Truth. Two great words of the divine Truth have forced themselves insistently on our minds through the crash of the ruin and the breath of the tempest and are now the leading words of the hoped-for reconstruction—freedom and unity."[1]

The world was tired of total warfare, and men wanted the reign of perpetual peace; but there were insuperable obstacles on the way of the realization of the ideal of human brotherhood. Without freedom—freedom for individual man and also for each nationality—healthy self-expression will be impossible; without order and unity—a sense of self-discipline in individual man and also in the life of each nation—harmony will be impossible. Freedom and Unity are indeed the poles of our

1. *Arya*, V, p. 299.

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existence; but we should learn to preserve the balance between them, else we shall be lured to one or the other with fatal completeness, and thereby we are sure to destroy ourselves either by indulging in an excess of "freedom" or by succumbing to the death-trap of total collectivism.

This was the problem that faced the "Big Four" of the Peace Conference at Versailles; but none of them—not even President Woodrow Wilson—could rise to the occasion. They were tired old men, either without vision or without vitality; and the world waited— "humped in silence"— for the results of the Peace Conference. Sri Aurobindo read the signs correctly and wrote on "1919," the fateful year of the Carthaginian Peace, in the July issue of the *Arya*:

> "This year too may be only the end of an acute phase of a first struggle, the commencement of a breathing time, the year of a makeshift, the temporary halt of a flood in motion. That is so because it has not realized the deeper mind of humanity nor answered to the far-reaching intention of the Time-Spirit."[1]

The "Big" Powers were but manœuvring for position in the post-War world; the imposition of reparations on Germany was, as Lord Keynes was fast realizing, a stupid business; the scramble for her former colonies was most unedifying; the

1. *Arya*, V, pp. 765-6.

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inability of the chief Powers to achieve unanimity of opinion on the momentous issues of the day was very portentous. The Allies might have won World War I, but they were fast losing the Peace!

Moreover, for all the talk of "making the world safe for democracy" or making it a "place fit for heroes to live in," the War had not been fought on a clear-cut moral issue; it had been but "a very confused clash and catastrophe of the inter-tangled powers of the past, present and future. The result actually achieved....is not the last result nor the end of the whole matter, but it represents the first sum of things that was ready for working out in the immediateness of the moment's potency. More was involved which will now press for its reign, but belongs to the future."[1] In regard, then, to the central human problem of achieving a concord between the two poles of Freedom and Security on a world basis, World War I was worse than useless; one more chapter of Human History was ended, but all had yet to be begun; the human spirit had "still to find itself, its idea and its greater orientation."[2]

Sri Aurobindo's worst fears had come true. And so a year later he wrote again in the *Arya* under the title, "After the War":

"The war that was fought to end war has

1. *Arya*, V, p. 767.
2. *Ibid.*, V, p. 768.

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been only the parent of fresh armed conflict and civil discord and it is the exhaustion that followed it which alone prevents as yet another vast and sanguinary struggle. The new fair and peaceful world order that was promised us has gone far away into the land of chimeras. The League of Nations that was to have embodied it hardly even exists or exists only as a mockery and a byword. It is an ornamental, a quite helpless and otiose appendage to the Supreme Council, at present only a lank promise dangled before the vague and futile idealism of those who are still faithful to its sterile formula, a League on paper and with little chance, even if it becomes more apparently active, of being anything more than a transparent cover or a passive support for the domination of the earth by a close oligarchy of powerful governments or, it may seem, of two allied and imperialistic nations."[1]

This "prophecy" was uttered in August 1920; the history of the two subsequent decades has amply borne it out; and World War I and the Peace of Versailles did not *end* War—for we are again in the midst of another and a bloodier struggle, and none of us can say when World War II will end or whether it at least will give us a healthy and a lasting peace![2]

1. *Arya*, VII, p. 28.
2. Written in October 1943.

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VI

Thus for six years and a half, the *Arya* gave its readers and the world at large sheer Plenty in the different departments of knowledge—philosophy, literature, yoga, politics, art, criticism, and sociology. M. Richard's collections of extracts from the World's outstanding thinkers, suggestively grouped under various headings, might also have appealed to many readers of the *Arya*; the wise men and women of all ages and climes figure in these anthologies and often reinforce, by necessary implication, the more studied and systematic expositions in Sri Aurobindo's major sequences and other contributions. The magazine seems to have paid its own way, and even to have left a surplus behind. And, although the *Arya* ceased publication in 1921, its message is there for all time to come; it is there for men and women to read and to ponder, to ponder and to live, to live and to realize.

While we shall discuss the "message" of the *Arya* in the subsequent chapters, we shall here say a word or two about Sri Aurobindo's prose style. We have seen that his stay in England gave Sri Aurobindo, not only a perfect mastery of English, but also a very considerable, often a most intimate, acquaintance with other modern European and Classical languages; during his stay in Baroda, Sri Aurobindo likewise mastered Sanskrit, Bengali, Gujarati and Marathi; in the first years of the Pondicherry period, Sri Aurobindo seems to have read

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and mastered the Vedas also. Again, by the time Sri Aurobindo began editing the *Arya*, he had already played several rôles in the *lila* of life—student and teacher, poet and critic, editor and politician, patriot and prophet,—and he was now a man of steady wisdom, a possessor of a deep, integral knowledge. We thus find in the Sri Aurobindo of the *Arya* period a master of many languages and knowledges and disciplines, which make him, incidentally, a gifted writer in English who finds it easy and natural to turn his thoughts into verse or to give them, in the words of Dryden, " the other harmony of prose."

Sri Aurobindo's prose works are many in number, fall under various categories, and are the by-products of about fifty years of almost ceaseless literary activity. The " New Lamps for Old " and Bankim Chandra articles in the *Indu Prakash* ; the editorial and other contributions to the *Bandemataram* and the *Karmayogin* and the *Arya* ; and, more recently, the letters—hundreds of them—to the disciples : if one considers all this in bulk, one knows at once that one is standing before a born lord of language ; for Sri Aurobindo scatters words about, at once with precision and liberality ; he is both voluble in appearance and compact in effect ; and he is so consummate a literary artist that his art ever covers up the traces of its toils, leaving only the well-cut diamond behind. There is not, of course, one style in them all but rather many equally significant

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and triumphant styles ; and yet it is not far from the truth to say that Sri Aurobindo's most characteristic means of self-revelation is a poetic, highly ornate, and richly nervous style that recalls English masters like Burton and Browne and Lamb and Landor at different times but is, in fact, *sui generis*.

Sri Aurobindo's deliberate compositions in prose, whether they be stray journalistic essays or vast thought-edifices, are generally distinguished by the qualities of clarity, quiet assurance, classical phrasing, and appropriateness to the theme and the mood and the occasion. You may tackle any of his prose "tracts for the times" or journalistic effusions or massive treatises,—there is no faltering at the exordium, no thinness in the structure of the argument, no weakness in the peroration. Works like *The Life Divine*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *The Future Poetry*, *The Psychology of Social Development*, *The Ideal of Human Unity* and *A Defence of Indian Culture* are mighty edifices, boldly conceived and executed with both imagination and a minute particularity. Sri Aurobindo has never felt it beneath his notice to attend to details ; a true artist, he has always realized that even seeming trifles have their own appointed place in the fullness of the final achievement. As he once wrote to Dilip :

> "Each activity is important in its own place ; an electron or a molecule or a grain may be small things in themselves, but in their place they are

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indispensable to the building up of a world; it cannot be made up only of mountains and sunsets and streamings of the aurora borealis—though these have their place there. All depends on the force behind these things and the purpose in their action...."[1]

Sri Aurobindo has accordingly made his essays and treatises carry much spiritual force and he has written them all with a specific though many-sided purpose. Although his prose works were mostly written under the peculiar exigencies of periodical publication, they nevertheless preserve form and unity of impression, and claim and secure for Sri Aurobindo a place among the four or five supreme modern masters of English prose.

VII

It is, perhaps, convenient as it is also necessary to study in particular the two monumental works, *Essays on the Gita* and *The Life Divine*,—study them not only on account of their thought-content but also as works of prose art—because they have the added advantage of having gone through a process of revision since their publication in the *Arya* and they are, further, easily accessible now in book form. The *Essays* are in intention exegetical; the Lord's Song is paraphrased, often verse by verse;

1. Quoted in *Tirthankar*, p. 366.

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Lord Krishna's uttered and unuttered thoughts are sifted, arranged, illustrated, expanded; seemingly and endlessly repetitive, the *Essays* are seen in the end to be somehow endowed with a marvellous compactness and unity of their own. What has happened is this: while doubtless deriving his primary inspiration from the "Song Celestial," Sri Aurobindo has created out of it his own rich individual music that enchants and exhilarates the reader and gradually effects in him a heightened awareness and a keener sensibility.

Likewise, when superficially considered, a work like *The Life Divine* would appear to be a severely—even forbiddingly—abstruse treatise, bristling with obscurities and technical terms and puzzling differentiations. On the other hand, closer acquaintance with it makes one realize that the whole Himalayan edifice is only a Beethovenian prose symphony. There are discussions, no doubt, and in so far as they are discussions they give adequate proof of a virile mental forge at work; no mere logician or dialectician developed a thesis or elaborated an argument or demolished an imperfect theory better than Sri Aurobindo does—and does frequently—in *The Life Divine*. But, speaking as a whole, "the reasoning and exposition in the book are not of the 'dialectical' kind proper to the divided mentality, but are of the same nature as, and cannot be separated from, direct vision."[1] Sri

1. R. Vaidyanathaswami in the *Indian Express*, August 15, 1940.

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Aurobindo thus writes with the glad illumined surmise—the calm and complete certainty—of the blest Seer who has been "there," and is now with us only because—

> He who would bring the heavens here
> Must descend himself into clay
> And the burden of earthly nature bear
> And tread the dolorous way.[1]

Naturally and inevitably, therefore, Sri Aurobindo's perceptions and revelations of Reality, his recordations of the choreography of Cosmic *lila*, and his delineation of the contours of Sachchidananda span themselves out into richly cadenced rhythmical patterns. We can give here only one superb example of such prose rhythm that is none-the-less as evocative and musical as a finely delivered blank verse passage:

> "Infinite being loses itself in the appearance of non-being and emerges in the appearance of a finite Soul; infinite consciousness loses itself in the appearance of a vast indeterminate inconscience and emerges in the appearance of a superficial limited consciousness; infinite self-sustaining force loses itself in the appearance of a chaos of atoms and emerges in the appearance of the insecure balance of a world; infinite Delight loses itself in the appearance of an insensible Matter

1. From an unpublished poem by Sri Aurobindo.

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and emerges in the appearance of a discordant rhythm of varied pain, pleasure and neutral feeling, love, hatred and indifference; infinite unity loses itself in the appearance of a chaos of multiplicity and emerges in a discord of forces and beings which seek to recover unity by possessing, dissolving and devouring each other."[1]

A timid writer might have attempted elegant variation in the wrong places and refrained from repeating the clauses "loses itself in the appearance" and "emerges in the appearance" no less than five times in the course of a single sentence; but Sri Aurobindo had courage enough, not only to call a spade a spade, but to call it five times a spade; and the repetitions, in result, sound like refrains contributing to the rich orchestration of the whole passage.

Again, how admirable—metallic in its hardness and lucid clarity—is a summing up like this:

"This then is the origin, this the nature, these the boundaries of the Ignorance. Its origin is a limitation of knowledge, its distinctive character a separation of the being from its own integrality and entire reality; its boundaries are determined by this separative development of the consciousness, for it shuts us to our true self and to the true self and whole nature of things and obliges us to live in an apparent

1. *The Life Divine*, I, p. 167.

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surface existence."[1]

It is, of course, not a nursery rhyme about Jack and Jill going up a hill to fetch water in a pail; it is the crest of an argument that has taken Sri Aurobindo some five hundred pages to elaborate. But it is not spoilt by any avoidable obscurity. Here are some more specimens of such granite phrasing picked at random from these two books:

> "When we withdraw our gaze from its egoistic preoccupation with limited and fleeting interests and look upon the world with dispassionate and curious eyes that search only for the Truth, our first result is the perception of a boundless energy of infinite existence, infinite movement, infinite activity pouring itself out in limitless space, in eternal Time, an existence that surpasses infinitely our ego or any ego or any collectivity of egos, in whose balance the grandiose products of æons are but the dust of a moment and in whose incalculable sum numberless myriads count only as a petty swarm."[2]
>
> "All Nature's transformations do indeed wear the appearance of a miracle, but it is a miracle with a method: her largest strides are taken over an assured ground, her swiftest leaps are from a base that gives security and certainty to the evolutionary saltus; a secret all-wisdom governs

1. *The Life Divine*, II, p. 517.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 108.

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everything in her, even the steps and processes that seem to be most unaccountable."[1]

" The love of the world spiritualized, changed from a sense-experience to a soul-experience, is founded on the love of God and in that love there is no peril and no shortcoming. Fear and disgust of the world may often be necessary for the recoil from the lower nature, for it is really the fear and disgust of our own ego which reflects itself in the world. But to see God in the world is to fear nothing, it is to embrace all in the being of God ; to see all as the Divine is to hate and loathe nothing, but love God in the world and the world in God."[2]

One comes across many such passages in the body of Sri Aurobindo's prose-writings, and indeed their balance, their perspicacity and the sheer vigour of their phrasing are almost as worthy of reverent study as are their logical structure and their close-grained fabric of thought.

VIII

Not infrequently, however, Sri Aurobindo's prose art emits flashes of poetry which subtly illumine and transfigure whole sentences and paragraphs. Simile and metaphor trespass upon the

1. *The Life Divine*, II, p. 975.
2. *Essays on the Gita*, I, p. 359.

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domain of cogent prose and language crystallizes into glittering images like these :

"We do not belong to the past dawns, but to the noons of the future."[1]

"For now the world Being appears to him as the body of God ensouled by the eternal Time-Spirit and with its majestic and dreadful voice missions him to the crash of the battle."[2]

"It has enormous burning eyes ; it has mouths that gape to devour terrible with many tusks of destruction ; it has faces like the fires of Death and Time."[3]

"....She labours to fill every rift with ore, occupy every inch with plenty."[4]

"He bade us leave the canine method of agitation for the leonine."[5]

"Knowledge waits seated beyond mind and intellectual reasoning throned in the luminous vast of illimitable self-vision."[6]

In such sentences—their number is legion—dialectical skill gives place to direct vision, the knife-edge clarity and sharpness of prose dissolve into poetic imagery and symbolism ; and Sri Aurobindo is seen to be poet no less than the wielder of an animated and effective English prose style.

1. *Essays on the Gita*, I, p. 12.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 59.
3. *Ibid.*, II, p. 178.
4. *The Renaissance in India*, p. 14.
5. *Bankim-Tilak-Dayananda*, p. 11.
6. *The Life Divine*, I, p. 183.

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Some of Sri Aurobindo's characteristically epigrammatic or aphoristic bits of prose are contained in *Thoughts and Glimpses* and other "minor" works and letters to disciples. One is occasionally overwhelmed by a whole shower of epigrams as in :

> "What is there new that we have yet to accomplish ? Love, for as yet we have only accomplished hatred and self-pleasing ; Knowledge, for as yet we have only accomplished error and perception and conceiving ; Bliss, for as yet we have only accomplished pleasure and pain and indifference ; Power, for as yet we have only accomplished weakness and effort and a defeated victory ; Life, for as yet we have only accomplished birth and growth and dying ; Unity, for as yet we have only accomplished war and association.
>
> In a word, godhead ; to remake ourselves in the divine image."[1]
>
> "Love is the keynote, Joy is the music, Power is the strain, Knowledge is the performer, the infinite All is the composer and audience. We know only the preliminary discords which are as fierce as the harmony shall be great ; but we shall arrive surely at the fugue of the divine Beatitudes."[2]

1. *Thoughts and Glimpses*, pp. 6-7.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

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Elsewhere Sri Aurobindo's wit and imagination fuse into gem-like images, fascinating, clear-cut and profoundly true :

> " God and Nature are like a boy and girl at play and in love.
>
> They hide and run from each other when glimpsed so that they may be sought after and chased and captured."[1]
>
> " What is God after all ? An eternal child playing an eternal game in an eternal garden."[2]
>
> " World, then, is the play of the Mother of things moved to cast Herself for ever into infinite forms and avid of eternally outpouring experiences."[3]

How very pretty, you'll say, but you'll also add, how suggestive and how very true ! The author of *The Life Divine* and the other Himalayan sequences in the *Arya* is not the crusty metaphysician some take him to be,—he was a sensitive humanist and poet before ever he dreamed of Yoga, and he remains a humanist and poet still !

1. *Thoughts and Glimpses*, p. 14.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
3. *The Life Divine*, I, p. 155.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE LIFE DIVINE

I

In the course of a letter to a disciple written in 1930, Sri Aurobindo carefully differentiated between the philosophical systems of the West and the East, between Western Metaphysics and the Yoga of the Indian saints and system-builders. In the West, the supreme instrument of knowledge has been regarded to be thought, intellect, the logical reason; "even spiritual experience has been summoned to pass the tests of the intellect, if it is to be held valid!"[1] In India the position has been just the reverse; in the East generally, in India particularly and continuously, while no doubt the metaphysical thinkers have tried to approach ultimate Reality through the intellect, they have given such mental constructions only a secondary status. On the other hand, "the first rank has always been given to spiritual intuition and illumination and spiritual experience"[2]; without their corroboration, mere

1. *The Riddle of this World*, p. 29.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

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intellectual constructions have been dismissed as useless. Further, the Indian metaphysical thinker has almost always been a Yogi also, one who has armed his philosophy "with a practical way of reaching to the supreme state of consciousness, so that even when one begins with Thought, the aim is to arrive at a consciousness beyond mental thinking."[1] The central problems of philosophy were formulated by Immanuel Kant in the form of three questions: what can I know? what ought I to do? and what may I hope for? These questions are akin to the Indian concepts of *tattva*, *hita* and *purushartha*; but all have spiritual experience as their base, their fertilizing source, their principal ground of justification.

Sri Aurobindo's major philosophical or semi-philosophical treatises also concern themselves with these questions, these concepts; but the emphasis varies, the connotation is wider. His ideal is not the realization of a personal release from *samsara*, a personal immortality, a personal immersion in the bliss of Brahman, now or later, here or elsewhere; it is rather the participation in the Life Divine here and now. *That* is—that ought to be—our goal; and we *can* reach it!

The goal that Sri Aurobindo places before us is thus the establishment of a Divine Life *here*—"upon this bank and shoal of time"—and a full

1. *The Riddle of this World*, p. 28.

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participation in its free and blissful and purposive life. But the goal has yet to be reached; it has beckoned to us from afar for ages and ages, and always, as men approached it, it disconcertingly receded into the distance. As Mr. Aldous Huxley, speaking for himself and many millions of other men and women, writes rather wistfully and resignedly: "The earthly paradise, the earthly paradise! With what longing, between the bars of my temperament, do I peer at its bright landscape, how voluptuously sniff at its perfumes of hay and raspberries, of honeysuckle and roast duck, of sun-warmed flesh and nectariness of the sea! But the bars are solid; the earthly paradise is always on the further side. Self-hindered, I cannot enter and make myself at home.... The mind is its own place and its tendency is always to see heaven in some other place."[1]

But others have told us, in ancient no less than in modern times, that heaven need not be "in some other place." "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you," said one of the wisest of the wise men, one of the divine men, one of the Messiahs, that this earth has thrown up in its long story of tribulation and travail; and a gifted English poetess has remarked:

> "Earth's crammed with heaven,
> And every common bush afire with God."[2]

1. *Texts and Pretexts* (Phœnix Edition), p. 75.
2. Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

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And it is hardly necessary to multiply such assurances and exhortations. The question therefore rings more insistently than ever and demands an answer: is it possible—will it ever be possible—to achieve in our midst "the Life Divine"?

Sri Aurobindo *knows* that the Life Divine can and must be realized on the earth. He knows where humanity stands today; he knows the goal that humanity should keep before it; and he knows also how humanity should march from one post of fulfilment to another and yet another till at last the goal itself is reached. Where do we stand? What is our goal? How shall we—when shall we—reach it? These are the questions (not very dissimilar to the questions that Kant posed) that Sri Aurobindo answers in his weighty and monumental treatises.

It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that Sri Aurobindo *knew*—knew by direct vision and spiritual experience—for an incontestable reality the things he wrote about in his *Arya* sequences; as he explained in one of the later issues of the *Arya*:

> "The spiritual experience and the general truths on which such an attempt should be based were already present to us....but the complete intellectual statement of them and their results and issues had to be found. This meant a continuous thinking, a high and subtle and difficult thinking on several lines, and this strain, which we had to impose on ourselves, we

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are obliged to impose also on our readers."[1] People who are accustomed to read philosophy in a tabloid form in Sunday Illustrated newspapers or in two-penny booklets cannot but be scared away by this many-sided manifestation of a "high and subtle and difficult thinking"; even many students of philosophy say that they find *The Life Divine* a tough and taxing proposition. But the thinking had to be done, the translation of the thought into word had also to be done; and Sri Aurobindo has done humanity these two great services. On its part, humanity too has to make an effort—the "high and subtle and difficult" effort—to follow Sri Aurobindo's lead and allow him to complete his mission.

In the *Arya*, Sri Aurobindo gave the place of honour always to *The Life Divine* sequence, in which he sought to work out the central tenets of his philosophy of life—the philosophy of the Life Divine—from the purely metaphysical standpoint. Man, said Sri Aurobindo, should transcend his human limitations and grow into the fullness and rich splendour of the Divine; he should achieve an earthly immortality; and even his terrestrial life should assume a divine character and "status-dynamis." And the sixteen hundred and odd luminous and thoughtful pages of *The Life Divine* are but devoted to the elaboration of the *raison*

1. *Arya*, July 1918.

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d'être of this the purposive core of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and teaching.

II

There is no question, of course, of summarizing *The Life Divine*—such an attempt is beyond the scope of the present work. We can only roughly indicate here the main lines of inquiry pursued in the book. Although both the first and second volumes of *The Life Divine* contain twenty-eight chapters each, the second volume is nearly three times as voluminous as the first. And for a very good reason: for, while the first volume tells us *what* is our goal, the second has to show—and this is a much more laborious and difficult proceeding—*how* and whether at all we may hope to reach it. Even so the *how* of the process is only described with a view to convincing the intellect, the logical reason; the description of the *how* of the process from a purely practical standpoint is reserved for another treatise, *The Synthesis of Yoga*.

The first volume of *The Life Divine*, then, is an attempt, yet one more attempt, the most recent and perhaps the final attempt, to describe "Omnipresent Reality and the Universe," to tell us what we are in appearance, where we are in the evolutionary scale, what we are in our veiled and inmost essence, where we are to rest when the evolutionary ascent has realized the promise of its impulsion and achieved thereby its cosmic purpose. Sri

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Aurobindo begins by saying that "the earliest preoccupation of man in his awakened thoughts and, as it seems, his inevitable and ultimate preoccupation" is "the divination of godhead, the impulse towards perfection, the search after pure Truth and unmixed Bliss, the sense of a secret immortality."[1] Man restlessly seeks happiness, harmony, fulfilment, felicity—call it what you will—he has sought them through all the dead æons of yesterday and the day before—and, there's the rub, he cannot find them here, or he finds them only to lose them, and he often loses them too "not with a bang but a whimper." Sensitive souls cannot help registering ever and always the obscure vibrations of the "still sad music of humanity," music that gently moans the frustrations and manifold hurts of life, music that reiterates the apparently unavoidable truth, "Sorrow Is"; power corrupts, knowledge confounds, friendship fails, love degenerates, and life is seen in consequence as a thing savourless or worse. How then can we hope to run felicity aground, how can we hope to churn out of the ambiguous shadows and muddy waters of earthly life the true nectar of abiding inward happiness?

Different people have tried to solve the problem in different ways. There was Papa Karamazov in Dostoevsky's novel whose attitude was summed up

1. *The Life Divine*, I, pp. 1-2.

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in the words: "You cannot solve the riddle of this world; take life as it is; drink life literally to the lees; life is worth living so long as there is an ounce of vodka or a single woman in this world." His second son, Ivan the intellectual sceptic, might call it "an insect's life"—but old Karamazov recks not; he would live his own life to the last. Even if materialism does not quite degenerate into Karamazovism, it is nevertheless an unbalanced view of life, a view that denies to life both the nourishment of the Spirit and the hope of tomorrow.

If the "Materialist Denial" is false, one-sided, and even dangerous, the 'Refusal of the Ascetic' is no less false, it is equally one-sided, and it may also prove a dangerous barrier on our path. The stoic and the ascetic would argue thus: life is but thus and thus; misery and pain *do* constitute the badge of our lives; we *are* hedged on all sides by the insuperable limitations of death, desire and incapacity; we are certainly fated to undergo

> The weariness, the fever, and the fret,
> Here, where men sit and hear each other groan....
> Where youth grows pale and spectre-thin and dies....
> Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
> And leaden-eyed despairs[1];

and hence we should learn (the only knowledge that is worth our while to learn) to minimize our demands upon life. And, after all, life is only for a brief

1. Keats, *Ode to a Nightingale.*

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now, let us then brave its ills with an unblenching stare, nay let us ignore them—and soon the everlasting Night must descend upon us all and give us release from *samsara*, the interlocked fatuity of terrestrial life; and we will then leave the very smell of the earth behind, we will then surely taste the joys of Heaven, the splendours of Vaicuntha, the bliss of inapprehensible Sachchidananda!

This is the human predicament, then; "Sorrow Is," Evil and Pain disagreeably flourish under our very eyes, and there are, apparently, only two ways of combating, or rather of by-passing, the Enemy,—the materialistic way of making the best of a bad job, or even revelling in its very sloth and imperfection, and the stoical way of patient sufferance and resignation or the ascetic way of determined ignoration of life's tribulations and limitations. The materialist would affirm matter, matter only and matter alone, but deny the Spirit; he would swear by the earth and its million-hued concomitants, but deny Heaven and its unvisioned sights and voiceless harmonies. The ascetic, perching himself perilously at the other end of the scale, would mortify the flesh, but fiercely affirm the Spirit; he would deny the evidence of his senses and ignore the earth, but he would let his fancy roam and infer or anticipate the splendours of Heaven.

And yet, notwithstanding the materialist and the ascetic, the cry goes forth—has ever gone

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forth—from the depths of the human heart that somehow and somewhen we must seek and find Heaven *here*, we must find it and retain it here for ever. We cannot deny the Spirit, for the whole obscure current of our existence is up against the tongue's vain denial of the omnipresent Reality. Nor can we curb the flesh, inflict on it a thousand and one injuries of commission and omission,—for, not only is the process painful and laborious, but the endeavour is in most cases foredoomed to disastrous failure. Matter, flesh, the whole objective world, these are bound, sooner or later, to take their fearful revenge on all but the staunchest of these knight-errants of the Spirit. Likewise, Heaven is implicated all the time even in our own "too sullied earth," just as very earth is inextricably involved in all the splendorous concerns of Heaven. We want an all-inclusive, rather than an one-sided, approach to the citadel of Reality; we want an integral, rather than a partial, world-view, and we want a philosophy that consists of a series of affirmations rather than a series of negations and denials. Sri Aurobindo gives us what mankind has long been waiting for—a philosophy of affirmations and a philosophy of hope.

While Sri Aurobindo repudiates both the "Materialist Denial" and the "Refusal of the Ascetic," he readily recognizes "the enormous, the indispensable utility of the very brief period of rationalistic Materialism through which humanity

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has been passing "[1] as also the " still greater service rendered by Asceticism to Life "[2]; modern Materialism, in the main a Western phenomenon, has rendered a signal service to questing Man by providing him with a considerable body of knowledge regarding the lower planes of existence just as Asceticism, in the main an Eastern and even peculiarly an Indian phenomenon, has served Man by boldly adventuring into the Unknown and giving him intimations of the contours of the Spirit. And yet neither the Western revolt of Matter against Spirit nor the Indian revolt of Spirit against Matter can yield a harmony, a life-giving and light-giving philosophy. We must, therefore, admit " both the claim of the pure Spirit to manifest in us its absolute freedom and the claim of universal Matter to be the mould and condition of our manifestation."[3] The Materialist Denial is one version of the Reality, the Refusal of the Ascetic is its opposite version; they are alike severely partial versions, and hence omnipresent Reality must include and exceed both of them, and yet remain Itself, the One without a second. This is the base on which Sri Aurobindo constructs his metaphysics of the Life Divine, the base on which he would rear a balanced life participating in the

1. *The Life Divine*, I, p. 15.
2. *Ibid.*, I, p. 37.
3. *Ibid.*, I, p. 38.

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perfections—Truth, Beauty and Goodness; and hence he has a message for the West as well as the East, and neither the Occident nor the Orient can progress on the right path so long as they do not hearken to this beckoning voice from Pondicherry.[1]

III

Omnipresent Reality thus includes Matter at one end and Spirit at the opposite end; such a conception, however, will satisfy the human mind only if we can correctly and accurately mark the different stages by which Matter is involved from Spirit or Spirit is evolved from Matter. The stages in the " ascent " or " evolution " are, according to Sri Aurobindo, Matter, Life, Psyche, Mind, Supermind, Bliss, Consciousness-Force, Existence; the stages in the " descent " or " involution " are, conversely, Existence, Consciousness-Force, Bliss, Supermind, Mind, Psyche, Life, Matter. Sri Aurobindo has given his own connotations to some of these terms and it is not possible to go into it all here. The supreme Reality is envisaged as Sachchidananda; it is Pure Existence, it is Existence that is both Will and Force, and above all, it is *blissful* Existence. And yet it is this Sachchidananda that in the process of its " descent " or " in-

1. *Vide* Review of Maitra's *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, July 9, 1943.

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volution" causes the multiplicity, the disharmony, the oceanic spectacle of frustration and suffering, that we seem to discover in the phenomenal world. The modern science of Biology has made it easy for us to understand the evolution of life from inconscient matter, the evolution or emergence of Mind from life; inanimate matter, plant and animal, and rational man seem to be quite obviously three stages, three very distinct stages, in evolution. But the human mind cannot as yet—as a general rule—look beyond itself; it cannot see in the phenomenal world of the dualities a reflection or an immanence or play of manifestation of Bliss-Consciousness-Force-Existence, of the triune self-glory of Sachchidananda. It is as though a wall separates the two halves of the posited omnipresent Reality; it is as though the transparency of the glass is obscured and darkened by a heavy coating of Mercury on the other side—with the result that, as Mr. Huxley pointed out, the paradise of Sachchidananda is always "on the other side."

Sri Aurobindo's integral view of Reality recognizes the existence of the wall, of the heavy coating of Mercury, of the bars of the cage; but if we make the effort, and if the time is opportune, the wall can be pulled down, the coating of Mercury cleansed, the bars filed away and thrown out. The "new" elements in Sri Aurobindo's metaphysics of the Life Divine are thus three in number: firstly, the conception of a simultaneous process of

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evolution-involution or ascent-descent; secondly, the principle of integration at every stage of ascent-descent or evolution-involution; and thirdly, the conception of the Supermind,—Supermind that "waits seated beyond mind and intellectual reasoning," separated from them by the wall, the coating, the bars, the veil of Ignorance, "Supermind that is directly truth-conscious, a divine power of immediate, inherent and spontaneous knowledge."[1] With the sovereign help of these dynamic concepts, Sri Aurobindo is able to sketch in the first volume of *The Life Divine* a convincing survey of Sachchidananda, clearly marking and describing "its main realms and principalities."[2]

The words "ascent" and "descent" used in our discussion are to be understood in a psychological and not in a strictly material sense, for we are here using "a temporal figure in respect of an extra-temporal fact."[3] The stages in the journey, then,——the upward journey from Matter to Spirit and the downward journey from Spirit to Matter—are to be conceived as successive attempts at a dynamic comprehension of the One in the Many or the Many in the One, as progressive attempts to reduce more and more, and finally to eliminate altogether, the "immense hiatus that seems to exist

1. *Arya*, VI, p. 647.
2. R. Vaidyanathaswami, in the *Indian Express*, August 15, 1940.
3. Nolini Kanta Gupta (*Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, 1943, p. 4).

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between Supramental Truth-Consciousness and the Mind in the Ignorance."[1]

Unlike the materialist, Sri Aurobindo rightly points out that life cannot emerge from matter unless it is already involved in it ; it is not a play of unpredictable accident that brings out the emergent, but rather a preordained event in the cosmic plan. Thus even in Matter all the higher emergents, the highest included, are latent ; hence the *Taittiriya Upanishad* maintains that "Matter is Brahman." The process of evolution or ascent is thus but a drawing out of the powers that are already nascent within, it is in the nature of a legitimate and inevitable self-exceeding ; this act of ascent or evolution or self-exceeding is concurrent with a corresponding act of descent or involution or self-limitation from above. Ascent thus ever goes hand in hand with descent, emergence thus ever brings about integration in its wake. Life evolved out of matter, it energized matter, it did not deny or throw away matter ; as it were, matter was lifted out of its sheer inconscience and made conscious or semi-conscious in plant and animal life. Likewise, when mind emerged out of life, man the mental being did not deny—he could not deny—either life or matter ; he achieved a new integration, a new harmony of all three, with the psyche—"the animating principle in man....the source of all vital activities, rational

1. *The Life Divine*, I, p. 416.

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or irrational "[1]—as the true master of the ceremonies, both the "desire-soul which strives for the possession and delight of things" and the more deeply and obscurely lodged "true psychic entity which is the real repository of the experiences of the spirit."[2] That is why Sri Aurobindo envisages the progressive movement of Consciousness as a threefold movement: an upward movement—the evolution or the ascent or the emergence; a downward movement—the involution or the descent or the immersion; and an inward movement—the integration, or total unification, being the supreme result of the linking up with the true psychic entity or Soul.

The position now is—and this is Sri Aurobindo's answer to the question, Where do we stand?—that the movement of evolution has reached the level of the Mind. The Mind was a valuable emergent at a particular stage in evolution; but it now displays the very defects of its great qualities. Even Rochester found it necessary to emphasize its limitations:

Reason, an Ignis Fatuus in the mind,
Which, leaving light of nature, sense, behind,
Pathless and dangerous wandering ways it takes
Through error's fenny bogs and thorny brakes,
Whilst the misguided follower climbs in vain
Mountains of whimsies heaped in his own brain;
Stumbling from thought to thought, falls headlong down
Into doubt's boundless sea....

1. *The Oxford English Dictionary.*
2. *The Life Divine*, I, pp. 402-3.

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"Mind is that which does not know, which tries to know and which never knows except as in a glass darkly. It is the power which interprets truth of universal existence for the practical uses of a certain order of things; it is not the power which knows and guides that existence and therefore it cannot be the power which created or manifested it."[1] Or, as Sri Aurobindo puts it very succinctly elsewhere, "Reason was the helper; Reason is the bar"![2]

When, as a result of the next evolutionary jump, Mind pierces through the lid of the Ignorance and touches the plane of Supramental Consciousness, man will have passed beyond knowings, he will have acquired the omniscience and omnipotence of superconscient Knowledge. The discords of the world will vanish, the blind play of forces will acquire the potency of Conscious-Force, and the spectacle of the dualities will be transfigured into a manifestation of the *lila* of the Supreme. Man will then realize that World-existence is indeed "the ecstatic dance of Shiva which multiplies the body of the God numberlessly to the view: it leaves that white existence precisely where and what it was, ever is and ever will be; its sole absolute object is the joy of the dancing."[3]

1. *The Life Divine*, I, pp. 178-9.
2. *Thoughts and Glimpses*, p. 1.
3. *The Life Divine*, II, p. 119.

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IV

This in itself is by no means a "new" ideal placed before humanity; for many other thinkers and seers in the recent and remote past also glimpsed the possibility, if not always the inevitability, of the mind successfully casting aside its Ignorance and attaining to Superconscience. "It is a keen sense of this possibility," says Sri Aurobindo, "which has taken different shapes and persisted through the centuries—the perfectibility of man, the perfectibility of society, the Alwar's vision of the descent of Vishnu and the Gods upon earth, the reign of the saints, *sadhunam rajyam*, the city of God, the millennium, the new heaven and earth of the Apocalypse. But these intuitions have lacked a basis of assured knowledge and the mind of man has remained swinging between a bright future hope and a grey present certitude."[1] It is Sri Aurobindo's mission to supply this "basis of assured knowledge" so that the envisaged possibility may indeed become a distinctive and splendorous actuality.

The second volume of *The Life Divine* sets out to show *how* we may hope to achieve the desired transformation of our limited, ignorant, and self-divided earth nature. At the outset Sri Aurobindo tackles the problem of the origin of this Ignorance—

2. *The Life Divine*, II, pp. 290-1.

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the Ignorance that baffles us at every turn, that checkmates us in every direction, that perverts our purposes and makes them awry and futile. If the Universe is a creation of the Infinite Consciousness, how then did Ignorance originate? It cannot be part and parcel of inconscient Matter, for Matter after all ultimately outgrows the limitations of the Ignorance; neither can Ignorance be part and parcel of the Spirit,—for in that case Reality will be self-divided at the fountain source itself, an altogether impossible supposition! What, then, is Ignorance?

Sri Aurobindo solves this problem by affirming that Ignorance too is Knowledge—only it is partial or imperfect knowledge. He does not feel the need to posit the existence of a beginningless power that creates the illusions and unrealities of the world; on the contrary, Sri Aurobindo posits "an original, a supreme or cosmic Truth-Consciousness creative of a true universe, but with mind acting in that universe as an imperfect consciousness, ignorant, partly knowing, partly not knowing,—a consciousness which is by its ignorance or limitation of knowledge capable of error, mispresentation, mistaken or misdirected development from the known, of uncertain gropings towards the unknown, of partial creations and buildings, a constant half-position between truth and error, knowledge and nescience."[1] It will be seen from this that there is

1. *The Life Divine*, II, pp. 217-8.

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a whole spiral of Knowledge or Consciousness ; at the bottom it takes the form of nescience or inconscience, at the top it takes the form of Knowledge or Superconscience ; and in the middle region ruled by the divided mind, it takes the form of partial (and hence imperfect or even wrong) knowledge or Ignorance. Sri Aurobindo thus makes Maya and Avidya much less fearful things than they are in the metaphysics of the great Sankaracharya. Ignorance arises on the way and it will also disappear on the way. It is neither beginningless Maya nor original Sin ; it is but a characteristic feature at one stage in the descent of Consciousness ; and when the counter-movement of ascent passes that stage, Ignorance will inevitably cast off its present badges of limitation and perversion, and grow into real Knowledge,—Knowledge that achieves a total compenetration of *what does, what knows,* and *what is.*

But why should this Ignorance—even in this less fearful and less permanent form—ever arise at all ? In answering this important and almost crucial question, Sri Aurobindo takes recourse to the concept of Tapas or " concentration of power of consciousness " to achieve a particular end, either a passive state of equilibrium of forces or an active state of forces in motion. He quotes this well-known passage from the *Taittiriya Upanishad* :

" He desired, ' May I be Many,' he concentrated in Tapas, by Tapas he created the

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world ; creating, he entered into it ; entering, he became the existent and the beyond-existence, he became the expressed and the unexpressed, he became knowledge and the ignorance, he became the truth and the falsehood : he became the truth, even all this whatsoever that is."[1]

Sri Aurobindo thinks that Tapas is the characteristic of *sat* as well as of *chit*, of the passive as well as the active Brahman, and it is also the ground plan of the Bliss of Brahman, *anandamaya ;* and therefore he argues that the origin of the Ignorance must be sought for " in some self-absorbed concentration of Tapas, of Conscious-Force in action on a separate movement of the Force ; to us this takes the appearance of mind identifying itself with the separate movement and identifying itself also in the movement separately with each of the forms resulting from it. So it builds a wall of separation which shuts out the consciousness in each form from awareness of its own total self, of other embodied consciousnesses and of universal being."[2]

The Ignorance, then, is a necessary rung or resting-place in the descending and ascending movements of Consciousness ; the " fall " is only a preparation—a strategic retreat—that facilitates the fulfilment of the Divine purpose :

" The Ignorance is a necessary, though quite

1. *The Life Divine*, II, p. 413.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 435.

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subordinate term which the universal Knowledge has imposed on itself that that movement might be possible,—not a blunder and a fall, but a purposeful descent, not a curse, but a divine opportunity. To find and embody the All-Delight in an intense summary of its manifoldness, to achieve a possibility of the infinite Existence which could not be achieved in other conditions, to create out of Matter a temple of the Divinity would seem to be the task imposed on the spirit born into the material universe."[1]

In Ignorance and Nescience we have no death, only a frenzy or a swoon of the All-Knowledge and All-Will ; this swoon and this frenzy are not eternal, they have come up to the surface of existence for a little while and they will be exceeded when they have fulfilled their cosmic tasks.

Meanwhile Man, who has awakened from the swoon of inconscience and nescience, and is now involved in the gyrations of the frenzy of Ignorance engenders in his midst other byproducts of his limited state : it would thus appear that " a limited consciousness growing out of nescience is the source of error, a personal attachment to the limitation and the error born of it the source of falsity, a wrong consciousness governed by the life-ego the source of evil....because it does these things as a separate ego for its separate advantage and not

1. *The Life Divine*, II, p. 453.

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by conscious interchange and mutuality, not by unity, life-discord, conflict, disharmony arise, and it is the products of this life-discord and disharmony that we call wrong and evil. Nature accepts them because they are necessary circumstances of the evolution... The evolutionary intention acts through the evil as through the good....this is the reason why we see evil coming out of what we call good and good coming out of what we call evil; and, if we see even what was thought to be evil coming to be accepted as good, what was thought to be good accepted as evil, it is because our standards of both are evolutionary, limited and mutable."[1]

This is how Sri Aurobindo explains the origin, the distinctive character, and the inevitable concomitants of the Ignorance; and therefore "a return or a progress to integrality, a disappearance of the limitation, a breaking down of separativeness, an overpassing of boundaries, a recovery of our essential and whole reality must be the sign and opposite character of the inner turn towards Knowledge."[2] To the task of describing this "inner turn towards Knowledge"—the spiritual evolution—Sri Aurobindo addresses himself in the second part of the second volume of *The Life Divine*.

V

"The principle of the process of evolution is a

1. *The Life Divine*, II, pp. 501-3.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 517.

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foundation, from that foundation an ascent, in that ascent a reversal of consciousness and, from the greater height and wideness gained, an action of change and new integration of the whole nature."[1] This is Sri Aurobindo's classical definition and description of the evolutionary process. Step by step—from Matter to Life, from Life to Mind, from Mind to Supermind, from Supermind to Sachchidananda—consciousness has to be organized, heightened and made at last all-knowing and all-powerful and all-blissful. The evolutionary process having now reached the rung of the Mind, the next forward leap has to achieve the supramentalization of the consciousness, completing the passage "from the evolution in the Ignorance to a greater evolution in the Knowledge, founded and proceeding in the light of the Superconscient and no longer in the darkness of the Ignorance and Inconscience."[2]

And yet this transition cannot be effected by aspiring Man alone; his endeavour to forge ahead in the evolutionary scale must be met half-way by a corresponding descent of consciousness also. This is how, too, it will happen, as it has already happened in the earlier sweeps of the evolutionary process. Human aspiration will resolve itself into an upsurging engine of undivided effort to exceed the limitations of the Ignorance; and, simultaneously, the

1. *The Life Divine*, II, p. 656.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 811.

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opportune descent of Consciousness will flood the shining tablelands of human effort and effect a radical change in the consciousness and achieve a new integration of the whole nature; "the two movements....are the two ends of a single consciousness whose motions, now separated from each other, must join if the life power is to have its more and more perfect action and fulfilment or the transformation for which we hope. The vital being with the life-force in it is one of these ends; the other is a latent dynamic power of the higher consciousness through which the Divine Truth can act, take hold of the vital and its life-force, and use it for a great purpose here."[1]

However, so great is the difference between the states of the Mind in the Ignorance and Mind in the Knowledge that Sri Aurobindo believes that even this transition from the Mind to the Supermind is itself marked by various steps or resting places or "slow gradations" on the way. These discernible slow gradations—steps in the spiral of ascent—are, respectively, Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition, and Overmind; and Mind starts this particular segment of the evolutionary race, and Supermind consummates it. It is only when man's earth nature encompasses the great leap from Mind to Supermind, touching the four sign-posts of Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition

1. *The Riddle of this World*, p. 16.

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and Overmind on the way,—then indeed would Man be able to complete the spiritual evolution, to fulfil the evolutionary purpose, to exceed himself by outgrowing the limitations of death, desire and incapacity, and to partake once and for all in an earthly immortality.

Sri Aurobindo has described with painstaking accuracy and poetic vividness the varied stages of Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition and Overmind in the twenty-sixth chapter of the second volume of *The Life Divine*[1]; when the transformation is achieved at last, the resulting integral knowledge will unify all things in the One, and resolve all the chords and discords of terrestrial life into the indivisible harmony of Sachchidananda.

The description of the nature and evolutionary status of the Supermind (also variously called as Real-Idea, *Rita-cit*, *Vijnana*, and Truth-Consciousness) is, perhaps, the most original and valuable part of *The Life Divine*. By seizing the full significance of the Supermind and linking it up with the rest of the available body of knowledge, Sri Aurobindo has been able to give us an utterly convincing synthetic or integral view of omnipresent Reality. Man *can* exceed his limitations; he *will* exceed his limitations; and when this next evolutionary experiment is concluded, he will have both the knowledge and the power, the power no less than

1. *Vide* Appendix for a description of these intermediate stages.

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the joy that Supramental Truth-Consciousness necessarily brings in its equipage: he will then indeed become the Knowledge-Soul, the Vijnanamaya-Purusha, and he will "raise his total being into the spiritual realm."[1] No doubt, there will be a further Beyond still; for "the Vijnanamaya level is not the supreme plane of our Consciousness, but a middle or link plane interposed between the triune glory of the utter Spirit, the infinite existence, consciousness and bliss, and our lower triple being."[2] But for *us*, who are as yet only wallowing in the mire of the lower hemisphere, the Supramental level is itself so far off, far above, that we need not worry ourselves immediately about this "supreme" plane of Consciousness.

We are assured by Sri Aurobindo in the most categorical manner that it is not foolhardy on our part to look forward to a supramental transformation of our terrestrial existence: "the supramental change is a thing decreed and inevitable in the evolution of the earth-consciousness."[3] Sri Aurobindo, however, makes it very clear that the supramental transformation of the life of an individual here, another there, cannot in itself, or by itself, usher in "a new Heaven and a new Earth" in our midst: for, "while the individual

1. *Arya*, IV, p. 28.
2. *Ibid.*, IV, p. 93.
3. *The Mother*, pp. 83-4.

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must be the instrument and first field of the transformation," " an isolated individual transformation is not enough and may not be wholly feasible. Even when achieved, the individual change will have a permanent and cosmic significance only if the individual becomes a centre and a sign for the establishment of the supramental Consciousness-Force as an overtly operative power in the terrestrial workings of Nature,—in the same way in which thinking Mind has been established through the human evolution as an overtly operative power in Life and Matter. This would mean the appearance in the evolution of a gnostic being or Purusha and a gnostic Prakriti, a gnostic Nature."[1] If, thus, the supramentalized individual—the Gnostic Being—will only return to the world of widest commonalty from the sun-lit heights of his *vijnanamaya*, he must inevitably influence his surroundings and " even the world of ignorance and inconscience might discover its own submerged secret and begin to realize in each lower degree its divine significance."[2]

This, then, is the hope, this the process; but *when* all this will take place nobody can tell. Mr. Nolini Kanta Gupta says that " the Day will come... it may be today or tomorrow, it may be a decade hence, or it may even be a century or a millennium

1. *The Life Divine*, II, p. 1021.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 1022.

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hence ; it will come all the same."[1] But Sri Aurobindo himself seems to think—or at least to hope—that the date of the supramental descent is not far off, that the imminent conquest of the Asuric forces that are now using the Axis Powers for their own ends will, perhaps, create conditions auspicious enough for the supramental descent to become a distinct possibility. He also warns us not to construct the Supramental Consciousness in the image of the Mind ; for, if we worshipped a doll filled with egregious mental stuff as if it were the Supermind, when the genuine article descended at last we shall be most disappointed indeed !

VI

In the foregoing pages we have tried to give briefly—all too briefly—some of the leading ideas in Sri Aurobindo's *magnum opus*, often in the Master's own words. The prospect that he holds out before us is that of the gradual uprearing on this earthly base of " a life of spiritual and supramental supermanhood,"[2] the organization of the " constant miracle " of the Life Divine. Even this verbal formulation of the Promise is a thing of good augury for Man, the self-divided and anguished pilgrim starting on the road to Felicity ;

1. *The Malady of the Century*, p. 76.
2. *The Life Divine*, II, pp. 1181-2.

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the Promise will spur him on, it will endow him with the puissance to stand the shocks of the journey, it will make his *adhar* a fit receptacle for receiving and retaining the downpour of the spirit.

The Life Divine is the great book for the emergence of which the *Zeit Geist* has been plying long on the roaring loom of Time; it is, among text-books on Metaphysics, *the* book *par excellence*; it "has the character of a perfectly natural and inevitable synthesis of all that is valuable in the various main lines of intellectual seeking and vision, of aspiration and discipline, of upward effort and aim, of the Ancient and the Modern world, of the West and the East"[1]; and it has not therefore been inaptly described as the last arch in the "bridge of thoughts and sighs which spans the history of Aryan culture."[2]

The singularly synthetic quality of the treatise is exemplified by the fact that members of different faiths, partisans of different schools of philosophy, admirers of different world-figures such as Plato, Hegel, St. Thomas Aquinas, Sankara, Ramanuja, all seem to find in *The Life Divine* a solution of some of their most obstreperous difficulties. Dr. Maitra sees many resemblances between the philosophy of Bergson and the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo; Dr. Varadachari likewise sees resembl-

1. V. Chandrasekharam, *Sri Aurobindo's "The Life Divine,"* p. 105.
2. S. K. Maitra, *The Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 108.

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ances between the world-views of Ramanuja and Sri Aurobindo ; a devoted and widely-read Roman Catholic thinks that *The Life Divine* reminds him often of the structure as well as the thought-content of St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica ;* and a Virasaiva discovers strong similarities between the *sat-sthala* philosophy of the *Vachanakaras* and the evolutionary process described in *The Life Divine* !

And it is all as it should be ; for *The Life Divine* is an attempt—a highly successful attempt—" to synthesize all knowledge in an ordered and related whole, in which the connection of one part with another is shown to be inevitable."[1] These words were written by Dr. Francis Aveling with reference to the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas ; but they sound peculiarly appropriate today when applied to the great achievement of Sri Aurobindo embodied in his book of books, *The Life Divine.* As a veteran professor of philosophy recently remarked, in the course of a private conversation, " After reading *The Life Divine,* it is not necessary to read any further ; the imperative thing now is to *live* its message and to realize the promise held out before us."

VII

Having elaborated in *The Life Divine* the core of his teaching from the standpoint of Metaphysics,

1. *St. Thomas Aquinas* (Edited by Fr. C. Lattey), p. 111.

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Sri Aurobindo wished to show that, while his teaching might come to us with the urgency of a modern dynamism, it but enshrines, extends, and fulfils the wisdom of the Vedic and Upanishadic Seers and of the Author of the immortal *Gita*. Accordingly, Sri Aurobindo attempted in his translations and commentaries on the *Isha* and *Kena Upanishads*, his translations of the Hymns of the Atris, and his sequences entitled respectively *The Secret of the Veda* and *Essays on the Gita*, to show that he was but one more link—one more arch—in the chain or bridge that since the emergence of Man from the forest has sought to stretch itself across the turbid waters of the Ignorance and link itself up with the Felicity that beckons to him from the yonder shore.

Sri Aurobindo's admirably lucid commentary on the *Isha Upanishad* has already run into several editions; in it he presents "the ideas of the *Upanishad* in their completeness," underlines the suggestions, supplies the necessary transitions, and thereby brings out "the suppressed but always implicit reasoning."[1] In the *Hymns of the Atris*, he keeps his eyes fixed throughout on his "primary object—to make the inner sense of the Veda seizable by the cultured intelligence of today."[2] As he

1. Sri Aurobindo, *Isha Upanishad* (1924 Edition), p. 13. *Vide* also C. C. Dutt's article on "Sri Aurobindo and the Isha Upanishad" in the *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, 1943.

2. *Arya*, II, p. 50.

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was himself living " in a kindred world of spiritual effort and aspiration " when he plunged into the Veda during his first years in Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo " was able to enter into the heart of the Vedic Rishis and their sacred mysteries."[1] The Veda had been interpreted in the past, either as a ritual system as per the commentaries of Sayana and his successors, or as a naturalistic body of knowledge by the paragons of European scholarship ; granted that the Veda was a body of ritual as well as a body of naturalistic knowledge, there was behind them both " the true and still hidden secret of the Veda,—the secret words, *ninya vachansi*, which were spoken for the purified in soul and the awakened in knowledge." The secret was " still hidden "; the letter had lived on " when the spirit was forgotten ; the symbol, the body of doctrine, remained, but the soul of knowledge had fled from its coverings."[2] Sri Aurobindo therefore boldly addressed himself to this great task and strove to show " the way of writing of the Vedic mysteries, their systems of symbols and the truths they figure "[3] ; and the result was one more enchanting sequence from Sri Aurobindo's pen. The articles in the sequence are full of original and convincing interpretations of the Vedic symbols, an example of

1. *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, 1942, p. 175.
2. *Arya*, I, p. 348.
3. *Ibid.*, IV, p. 766.

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which is Sri Aurobindo's identification of Sarama with the " Hound of Heaven ":

> " Whether Sarama figures as the fair-footed goddess speeding on the path or the heavenly hound, mother of the wide-ranging guardians of the path, the idea is the same, a power of the Truth that seeks and discovers, that finds by a divine faculty of insight the hidden Light and the denied immortality."[1]

The *Riks* thus yield their secrets one by one, till at last we are made to feel that what was " still hidden " in 1914 is hidden now no more; Sri Aurobindo has made us fully realize, by his convincing and inspiring interpretations, that the *Riks* are really " hymns to Light—to the Light that leads man from mortality into immortality."[2]

In his *Essays on the Gita*, again, Sri Aurobindo's aim was to seek and discover and exhibit " the deeper general truth which is sure to underlie whatever seems at first sight merely local and of the time."[3] Sri Aurobindo, unlike some of the many dialecticians who have commented on it, is interested in seizing the *Gita's* living message rather than in stretching it on the Procrustes' Bed of a particular system of philosophy. In words that now and then cease to be merely words but

1. *Arya*, II, p. 563.
2. V. Chandrasekharam, *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, 1942, p. 209.
3. *Essays on the Gita*, I, p. 9.

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vibrate rather like a flotilla of the spirit, in words that always invoke the desired and unique response, Sri Aurobindo elaborates the ancient and perennial and ever pertinent wisdom of the *Gita*, formulating step by step " the living message it still brings for man the eternal seeker and discoverer to guide him through the present circuits and the possible steeper ascent of his life up to the luminous heights of his spirit."[1]

The *Gita* has been commented upon so frequently, so voluminously, from so many view-points, commented upon again so brilliantly and so eloquently and so persuasively, that it is astonishing that Sri Aurobindo should nevertheless have succeeded in making his thousand-page treatise not a whit superfluous, not a whit second-hand or disagreeably obvious, but rather a radiant re-evocation of the *philosophia perennis* embodied in the Lord's Song. With the *Gita* in one hand (if, indeed, it is not already in one's memory) and the *Essays* in another, the reader's eyes shift to and fro, his imagination is powerfully roused, his intellect is excitedly alive, and the Poem and the Commentary are seen to cross and recross till at last they fuse into a stream of revelation and flow on for ever.

The *Gita* is a poem, it is the Song Celestial ; it embodies a philosophy, the *philosophia perennis* for

1. *Essays on the Gita*, II, p. 466.

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the truth-seeking Aryan; and it is, besides, a Handbook of Yoga. Himself a poet, a philosopher and a Yogin, Sri Aurobindo is admirably and ideally qualified to unravel and expound the underlying truths of the *Gita*, its intricate poetic symbolism, its play of piercing imagery, its hidden layers of thought. Reading the *Essays* is itself often an entrancing experience; the words repeatedly kindle into imagery and the reader almost feels that Kurukshetra is *here*, in a real and not only in a metaphorical sense. In a passage like the following where Sri Aurobindo wishes to suggest something of the "mystical tremendum" that seized Arjuna when he beheld the "Vision of the World-Spirit," the words acquire a winged urgency and dynamism that overwhelms the reader at once:

> "The supreme Form is then made visible. It is that of the infinite Godhead whose faces are everywhere and in whom are all the wonders of existence, who multiplies unendingly all the many marvellous revelations of his being, a world-wide Divinity seeing with innumerable eyes, speaking from innumerable mouths, armed for battle with numberless divine uplifted weapons, glorious with divine ornaments of beauty, robed in heavenly raiment of deity, lovely with garlands of divine flowers, fragrant with divine perfumes. Such is the light of this body of God as if a thousand suns had risen at once in heaven. The whole world multitudinously divided and yet

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unified is visible in the body of the God of Gods. Arjuna sees him, God magnificent and beautiful and terrible, the Lord of souls who has manifested in the glory and greatness of his spirit this wild and monstrous and orderly and wonderful and sweet and terrible world, and overcome with marvel and joy and fear he bows down and adores with words of awe and with clasped hands the tremendous vision."[1]

Likewise, when Sri Aurobindo, in the last chapter of the Second Series, attempts to "summarize the message of the *Gita*," he once more rises to the occasion—as he has done so often in the preceding nine hundred pages—and gives us a sustained piece of illumined and persuasive eloquence. The integrality of the *Gita's* philosophy and Yoga is emphasized all the time, but nowhere so fully and convincingly as in this concluding chapter; and the reader is led by slow gradations to the culminating exhortation of all:

"This then is the supreme movement, this complete surrender of your whole self and nature, this abandonment of all *dharmas* to the Divine who is your highest Self, this absolute aspiration of all your members to the supreme spiritual nature. If you can once achieve it, whether at the outset or much later on the way, then whatever you are or were in your outward

1. *Essays on the Gita*, II, pp. 176-7.

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nature, your way is sure and your perfection inevitable. A supreme Presence within you will take up your Yoga and carry it swiftly along the lines of your *svabhava* to its consummate completion. And afterwards whatever your way of life and mode of action, you will be consciously living, acting and moving in him and the Divine Power will act through you in your every inner and outer motion. This is the supreme way because it is the highest secret and mystery.... the deepest and most intimate truth of your real, your spiritual existence."[1]

VIII

In another important *Arya* sequence, *The Psychology of Social Development*,—a modest affair of twenty-four illuminating chapters,—Sri Aurobindo sketched in some detail the broad lines of social development in a world progressively inspired by the ideal of the Life Divine. What is man's duty to the community once he has solved his own personal problems and attained self-realization? Should he not impart his wisdom and give the inspiration of his example to his particular social group,—guide it, energize it, divinize it? At the outset Sri Aurobindo lays down the "law" govern-

1. *Essays on the Gita*, II, pp. 500-1. *Vide* also Anilbaran Roy's article on "Sri Aurobindo and the Gita" in the *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, 1942.

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ing—at any rate, the law that ought to govern—the progressive movements in a society or a community or a nation :

> " As the individual seeks his own self-development and strives rightly to find himself, to discover the law and power of his own being within himself and to fulfil it, because he is even after all qualifications have been made and caveats entered, not merely the ephemeral creature or a form of mind and body, but a being, a living power of the eternal Truth, so also a society, community, nation seeks its own self-fulfilment, strives rightly to find itself, to become aware within itself of the law and power of its own being and to fulfil it as perfectly as possible, to live its own life, to realize all its potentialities. And for the same reason : because this too is a being, a living power of the eternal Truth and is intended to express and fulfil the truth and power within it in its own way and to the degree of its capacities."[1]

Society is thus conceived as a being, capable of aspirations, endeavours, achievements ; but it is the individual in whom the urge to progress first manifests itself : " The Spirit discovers, develops, builds into form in the individual man and through the individual offers the discovery and the chance of the new self-creation to the communal mind...

1. *Arya*, III, p. 226.

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the communal mind holds things subconsciously at first or, if consciously, then in a confused, chaotic manner, and it is only through the individual mind that it can arrive at a clear knowledge and creation of the thing that it held in the subconscient self."[1] Such a leader of a forward movement in the life of a society, community or nation is almost its brain, its keeper of conscience, its inmost soul; and the leader, the spiritual man, who is endowed with the ability to guide human life towards the realization of its ideals is "typified in the ancient Indian idea of the Rishi, who living the life of man has found the word of the supra-intellectual, supra-mental, spiritual truth."[2] Like the *sruti*, the musical norm that gives life to and harmonizes the many clanging notes that traverse three octaves or more with a dizzy rapidity, he too, he the man of steady wisdom, can rise above mere human limitations and "guide the world humanly as God guides it divinely, because like the Divine he is in the life of the world and yet above it."[3]

It must be remembered, however, that social progress is not—not in its essence—a matter of legislative enactments. The leader of a society has to be a great soul who has plumbed the depths and touched the topmost heights of the spirit, and not merely a biologist or a sociologist, and not

1. *Arya*, IV, p. 675.
2. *Ibid.*, IV, p. 298.
3. *Ibid.*, IV, p. 298.

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certainly a "drain inspector" or a loud-mouthed promulgator of particular panaceas:

> "....the individuals who will most help the future of humanity in the new age will be those who will recognize a spiritual evolution as the destiny and therefore the great need of the human being; an evolution or conversion....of the present type of humanity into a spiritualized humanity, even as the animal man has been largely converted into a highly mentalized humanity....They (the spiritual leaders of the society) will especially not make the mistake of thinking that this change can be effected by machinery and outward institutions; they will know and never forget that it has to be lived out by each man inwardly or it can never be made a reality."[1]

Even so we must accept the fact, however unpalatable it might be, that, if one swallow does not make the summer, neither does the emergence of one great soul, a Gnostic Being or a Mahatma or a Rishi, in itself guarantee the immediate organization of a perfect society, community, nation; it is an indication of direction, it is a promise dangled before the eager eyes of the people; but the people too have to persevere in the path, and then only could they redeem the promise and make it a reality. If the number of these spiritual men,—

1. *Arya*, IV, pp. 739-40.

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these *samurai* in the service of the Divine, these Mahatmas and Rishis,—is sufficiently large, "then the Spirit who is here in man as the concealed divinity, the developing light and power, will descend more fully as the inner Godhead, the *avatar* into the soul of mankind and into the great individualities in whom the light and power are the strongest, and there will be fulfilled the change which will prepare the transition of human life from its present limits into those larger and purer horizons."[1]

IX

If, then, individual man can transmit something of his vision and his spirit-born strength to his community and help it also in some measure to realize its diviner potentialities, cannot this process be extended still further until it embraces at last humanity itself in its entirety? This is the age-long and still pertinent question that Sri Aurobindo discusses with his usual clarity and vision in the fifth of the famous sequences, a sequence of thirty-

1. *Arya*, IV, p. 741. The late Mahadev Govind Ranade also pinned his faith on the spiritual leadership of the Rishis; after enumerating some Indian Rishis past and present, he concluded his speech on "Vasishta and Visvamitra" thus: "A race that can ensure a continuance of such leaders can, in my opinion, never fail, and with the teachings of such men to guide and instruct and inspire us, I, for one, am confident that the time will be hastened when we may be vouchsafed a sight of the Promised Land." (The words were quoted by the Rt. Hon. V. S. Srinivasa Sastri in the course of his lecture on "Rishi Ranade" on the occasion of the Ranade Centenary).

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five chapters entitled *The Ideal of Human Unity.*

Sri Aurobindo tackles the problem of human unity both as a historian and as a social critic, both as a practical statesman and as an architect of the future. The problem seems at first more or less an insoluble one. The individual wants freedom, the fullest possible freedom, for without freedom life would appear to lose most of its flavour ; but the individual also wants security, he wants peace, he wants order and harmony within and without. How is he—how are we—to effect a balance between these two poles of existence, Freedom for the individual and Security for the aggregate ? The balance must be effected,—else either the individual will dwindle into an automaton or the aggregate will split up into a million fragments, and so cease to be :

> " The whole process of Nature depends on a balancing and a constant tendency to harmony between two poles of life, the individual whom the whole or aggregate nourishes and the aggregate which the individual helps to constitute. Human life forms no exception to the rule. Therefore the perfection of human life must involve in itself the unaccomplished harmony between these two poles of our existence, the individual and the social aggregate. The perfect society will be that which most entirely favours the perfection of the individual."[1]

1. *Arya*, II, p. 189.

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Humanity has already made several attempts to realize this balance between the two poles of our existence,—but the harmony remains as yet unaccomplished. Sri Aurobindo traces the stages in the urge towards harmony—the failures and the partial successes and the relapses—with a view to erecting the future on a firm foundation both of accurate historical knowledge and spiritual insight into the true destiny of man. The ideal of human unity has sought in the past to realize itself, first, by the development of a central authority, second, by bringing about a measure of uniformity in administration, and third, by achieving to a greater or lesser extent the transformation of that authority from the autocrat or the governing class into that of a body whose proposed function was to represent the thought and will of the whole community, the whole change representing in principle "the evolution from a natural and organic to a rational and mechanically organized state of society."[1]

But the working out of the ideal of human unity has had an arrested, even of late a perverse, development, and today[2] we witness the spectacle of a generally peace-loving humanity plunged into a sea of misery by the remorseless operations of a global war. The Hague Court and the League of Nations and the Kellogg Pact all have proved powerless to

1. *Arya*, III, p. 702.
2. Written in October 1943.

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bring about the permanent outlawry of war. The League and the Kellogg Pact failed because, among other things, they lacked the backing of a powerful international police or armed force. Sri Aurobindo does not subscribe to the view that the application of force is under all circumstances a sinful act :

> " Diffused, force fulfils the free workings of Nature and is the servant of life, but also of discord and struggle ; concentrated, it becomes the guarantee of organization and the bond of order."[1]

This is a truth which should not be lost sight of either by the uncompromising protagonists of *ahimsa* or by the architects of " New World Orders."

In spite of the gloomy prospect that envelops us all round, we must agree with Sri Aurobindo when he says that the men and women of today are progressively acquiring a cosmopolitan outlook, a unifying sentiment, and coming to realize the existence of more and more common interests, " or at least the interlacing and interrelation of interests in a larger and yet larger circle which makes old divisions an obstacle and a cause of weakness."[2] At the same time, we should not commit the mistake of the " god-state " gospellers and the totalitarian tub-thumpers by identifying unity with dead uniformity. As Sri Aurobindo warns us :

1. *Arya*, IV, p. 61.
2. *Ibid.*, IV, p. 744.

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> "Unity the race moves towards and must one day realize. But uniformity is not the law of life; life exists by diversity; it insists that every group, every being shall be, even while one with all the rest in its universality, yet by some principle or ordered detail of variation unique."[1]

Individuals, then, should seek unity, unity in the Divine, not uniformity in the bleak land of collectivism:

> "A spiritual oneness creating a psychological oneness which would not depend upon intellectual or other uniformity, and compelling a oneness of life which would also not depend on its mechanical means of unification, but would find itself enriched by a free inner variation and a freely varied outer self-expression, this would be the basis for a higher type of human existence."[2]

In an article entitled "The Passing of War," written during the second year of World War I, Sri Aurobindo emphasized in equally strong terms the necessity for building the future on durable spiritual foundations. Our immediate need is the outlawry of war; humanity cries out from the depths of its heart that it should be spared henceforth these periodical world conflagrations and their attendant incommensurable sufferings. With peace

1. *Arya*, IV, p. 300.
2. *Ibid.*, IV, p. 752.

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assured, humanity could forge further still ahead and start building the many-chambered mansion of the Life Divine. But how shall we achieve the permanent outlawry of war? Sri Aurobindo gives the answer, but it is for humanity to translate it into practice:

> "Only when man has developed, not merely a fellow-feeling with all men, but a dominant sense of unity and commonalty, only when he is aware of them not merely as brothers—that is a fragile bond—but as parts of himself, only when he has learned to live, not in his separate personal and communal ego-sense, but in a larger universal consciousness can the phenomenon of war, with whatever weapons, pass out of his life for ever."[1]

When war at last becomes a mere nightmare of the past, peace will indeed reign in our midst, and even our dream of the Life Divine will then become an actuality in the fullness of time. It is not, of course, Sri Aurobindo's view that the evolution of the Life Divine actually depends on the passing away of war. His view may be said to be rather the opposite. The present World War, for instance, is somewhat in the nature of an opportunity to Man to forge ahead. The war is not a fight between nations and governments, still less between good peoples and bad peoples, but

> "between two forces, the Divine and the

1. *Arya*, II, p. 576.

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Asuric. What we have to see is on which side men and nations put themselves; if they put themselves on the right side, they at once make themselves instruments of the Divine purpose in spite of all defects, errors, wrong movements and actions which are common to human nature and all human collectivities. The victory of one side (the Allies) would keep the path open for the evolutionary forces; the victory of the other side would drag back humanity, degrade it horribly and might lead even, at the worst, to its eventual failure as a race, as others in the past evolution have failed and perished....The Divine takes men as they are and uses men as His instruments even if they are not flawless in virtue, angelic, holy and pure. If they are of good-will, if, to use the Biblical phrase, they are on the Lord's side, that is enough for the work to be done."[1]

1. Letter to a Disciple: quoted in *The Advent*, Vol. I, No. 1, pp. 9-11.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

POET OF YOGA

I

We have seen in the concluding sections of the preceding chapter how the divinization of man the individual,—the emergence of the Gnostic Being,—will inspire his immediate environment and also accelerate the urge towards the realization of human unity. But the new Man will also favourably and vitally influence our conceptions of poetry and of art in general and thereby facilitate the production of genuine "futurist" art and poetry. Here, again, Sri Aurobindo's contributions, as futurist critic no less than as futurist poet, will form no mean foundations on which the edifices of the future may be safely and greatly reared.

The refreshingly stimulating and original series of articles that Sri Aurobindo contributed to *Arya* under the general caption, *The Future Poetry*, began as a notice of Dr. Cousins's *New Ways in English Literature*; the review, however, was only a starting point; the rest was drawn from Sri Aurobindo's own ideas and his already conceived view of Art and life; and, ultimately, the "review" became a treatise of thirty-two chapters, extending to about

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three-hundred and fifty pages of the *Arya*. Literary history, æsthetic criticism, appreciations of individual English poets, classical and modern, speculations on the future of poetry in general and of English poetry in particular, discussions on recondite themes like "Rhythm and Movement," "Style and Substance," "The Sun of Poetic Truth," "The Soul of Poetic Delight and Beauty," "The Form and the Spirit," etc., all these are seemingly recklessly thrown into Sri Aurobindo's critical and creative melting pot, and the result is a most refreshingly and illuminatingly informative and prophetic work of literary criticism.

The seer that he is, Sri Aurobindo glimpses the very head and front, feels the pulse and the very heart-beats, of the Future Poetry. Characteristically does he call his series of articles, not "The Future of Poetry," but simply as "The Future Poetry"; it is a thing as good as decreed—even as the supramental descent is a thing decreed and inevitable—that the future poetry should partake of the nature of the *mantra*, "that rhythmic speech which, as the Veda puts it, rises at once from the heart of the seer and from the distant home of the Truth."[1] Not that such poetry will be altogether "new": "Poetry in the past has done that in moments of supreme elevation; in the future there seems to be some chance of its making it a more

1. *The Future Poetry*, Introductory Chapter; *Arya*, IV, p. 318.

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conscious aim and steadfast endeavour."[1]

After laying down the important dictum that the true creator, the true hearer of poetry is the soul, Sri Aurobindo maintains that the poetic word acquires its extraordinary intensity and evocative power because "it comes from the stress of the soul-vision behind the word."[2] Words in poetry are not just words, words picked at random from a dictionary; words are nowadays printed or written, and hence they catch the eye, but words were not always printed or written; words are spoken, and they are heard by the human ear as they are spoken, but words need neither be spoken by the human mouth nor heard by the human ear. What, then, is the true content of the poetical word? It does have a particular look on the printed page, it does convey a particular sound to the ear, it does communicate something akin to an idea to the mind; but the word is more than what it looks and what it sounds and what it seems to mean; it is a symbol, it is a wave that floats in the ocean of Eternity, sometimes carrying a whisper from God to man or a prayer from man to God. In logical phraseology we might say that a word has both a definitive denotation and an unknown, almost limitless connotation; we might say that a word has both a semantic import and a phonetic significance; but we

1. *The Future Poetry*, Introductory Chapter; *Arya*, IV, p. 318.
2. *Ibid.*, Chapter on "The Essence of Poetry."

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cannot ever hope altogether to dispossess words of their potency, their mystery and their ineluctable magic. Words that are apparently rugged and prosaic when looked at within the covers of a dictionary or in the columns of a newspaper are suddenly kindled, at the poet's magic touch, into a flame of beauty that radiates " thoughts that wander through eternity." The true poetic word, then, while it too catches the attention of the eye and reverberates in the ear, ever strives rather to provoke the inward eye, to reach the inward ear, to sink into the deeper soul ; it is akin rather to a blinding emanation of the spirit that annihilates space and time and links the human soul with infinity and eternity.

" Vision, " says Sri Aurobindo, " is the characteristic power of the poet, as is discriminative thought the essential gift of the philosopher and analytic observation the natural genius of the scientist. The Kavi was in the idea of the ancients the seer and revealer of truth....Therefore the greatest poets have been always those who have had a large and powerful interpretative and intuitive vision of Nature and life and man and whose poetry has arisen out of that in a supreme revelatory utterance of it. "[1] A poet, whatever else he may or may not possess, should be endowed with " sight "—with an eye that can roll in a fine frenzy, glancing from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven—and

1. *The Future Poetry*, Chapter on " Poetic Vision and the Mantra. "

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with " voice "—with a tongue that renders the truths he has seen in terms of vivid imagery and compelling beauty. The thought-content and the rhythmic organization of a piece, however meritorious in themselves, will not make it a *poem* so long as they are not properly wedded to a corresponding intensity of vision. " And, " adds Sri Aurobindo, " this does not depend only on the individual power of vision of the poet, but on the mind of his age and his country, its level of thought and experience, the adequacy of its symbols, the depth of its spiritual attainment. "[1] A poet, even a very great poet, is a product of his own age; he is implicated in its limitations and its possibilities. In like manner, he is also a representative of his race, of his nation, of his people; he derives largely from them, he cannot quite get away from them: " The soul of the poet may be like a star and dwell apart; even, his work may seem not merely a variation from but a revolt against the limitations of the national mind. But still the roots of his personality are there in its spirit and even his variation and revolt are an attempt to bring out something that is latent and suppressed or at least something which is trying to surge up from the secret all-soul into the soul-form of the nation. "[2]

Sri Aurobindo devotes the next few chapters to

1. *The Future Poetry*, Chapter on " Poetic Vision and the Mantra."
2. *Ibid.*, Chapter on " The National Evolution of Poetry."

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a survey of English poetry from Anglo-Saxon to our own times. He is not giving us an academic history of English poetry after the manner of Courthope or Oliver Elton or even Earle Welby ; Sri Aurobindo's is a personal, a temperamental survey, and is therefore, not only more fresh and more interesting than the academic histories, but is also, as sheer interpretative criticism, more valuable at the same time. Everywhere one comes across the same passion for seizing the essential truth, the same intuition into the uttermost essence of poetry, the same unfailing sense for detecting subtle sound values and delicate movements in rhythm, and, above all, the same wonderful mastery of language that weaves derogation and appreciation, criticism and prophecy, illustration and generalization into a truly wonderful and mighty fabric of elaborate and enchanting prose.

Sri Aurobindo begins his account of English poetry by subscribing to the general opinion that of all the modern European tongues the English language "has produced the most rich and naturally powerful poetry, the most lavish of energy and innate genius."[1] After two chapters on the "character" of English poetry—chapters that reveal both scholarship and insight and lay bare both the great qualities and the still thwarted purposes of English poetry—Sri Aurobindo starts assessing,

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with "voice"—with a tongue that renders the truths he has seen in terms of vivid imagery and compelling beauty. The thought-content and the rhythmic organization of a piece, however meritorious in themselves, will not make it a *poem* so long as they are not properly wedded to a corresponding intensity of vision. "And," adds Sri Aurobindo, "this does not depend only on the individual power of vision of the poet, but on the mind of his age and his country, its level of thought and experience, the adequacy of its symbols, the depth of its spiritual attainment."[1] A poet, even a very great poet, is a product of his own age; he is implicated in its limitations and its possibilities. In like manner, he is also a representative of his race, of his nation, of his people; he derives largely from them, he cannot quite get away from them: "The soul of the poet may be like a star and dwell apart; even, his work may seem not merely a variation from but a revolt against the limitations of the national mind. But still the roots of his personality are there in its spirit and even his variation and revolt are an attempt to bring out something that is latent and suppressed or at least something which is trying to surge up from the secret all-soul into the soul-form of the nation."[2]

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with the same self-confidence and suggestion of authority, the work of the great or well-known English poets. Most of these assessments are couched in a language that, for all its rhythmical sweeps and imaginative fervour, is crystalline in purity and beauty. We have no space here to refer to Sri Aurobindo's many individual estimates : but we give below one or two significant extracts to convey a fair idea of the manner in which Sri Aurobindo discharges his function as a true appraiser of poetry :

> " Chaucer has his eye fixed on the object, and that object is the external action of life as it passes before him throwing its figures on his mind and stirring it to a kindly satisfaction in the movement and its interest, to a blithe sense of humour or a light and easy pathos. He does not seek to add anything to it or to see anything below it or behind its outsides, nor does he look at all into the souls or deeply into the minds of the men and women whose appearance, action and easily apparent traits of character he describes with so apt and observant a fidelity....But neither his poetic speech nor his rhythm has anything of the plastic greatness and high beauty of the Italians. It is an easy, limpid and flowing movement, a stream rather than a well,—for it has no depths in it,—of pure English utterance just fitted for the clear and pleasing poetic presentation of external life as if in an unsullied mirror,

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at times rising into an apt and pointed expression, but for the most part satisfied with a first primitive power of poetic speech, a subdued and well-tempered and even adequacy. Only once or twice does he by accident strike out a really memorable line of poetry; yet Dante and Petrarch were among his masters."[1]

"Byron, no artist, intellectually shallow and hurried, a poet by compulsion of personality rather than in the native colour of his mind, inferior in all these respects to the finer strain of his great contemporaries, but in compensation a more powerful elemental force than any of them and more in touch with all that had begun to stir in the mind of the times,—always an advantage, if he knows how to make use of it, for a poet's largeness,—and ease of execution, succeeds more amply on the inferior levels of his genius, but fails in giving any adequate voice to his highest possibility. Wordsworth, meditative, inward, concentrated in his thought, is more often able by force of brooding to bring out that voice of his greater self, but flags constantly, brings in a heavier music surrounding his few great clear tones, drowns his genius at last in a desolate sea of platitude. Neither arrives at that amplitude of achievement which might have been theirs in a more fortunate time, if ready forms had been

1. *The Future Poetry*, Chapter on "The Course of English Poetry."

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given to them, or if they had lived in the stimulating atmosphere of a contemporary culture harmonious with their personality."[1]

Mark the subtle variations, the suggestive qualifications, the many parentheses on the way; mark too how in such appraisements comparative criticism acquires a poetical fervour and finality; and *The Future Poetry* is full of such beautiful and memorable and essentially accurate appraisements!

Likewise in the four chapters on "Recent English Poetry," Sri Aurobindo attempts—and this is a much more difficult and risky thing than the appraisement of the poets of yesterday or the day before!—a personal, unambiguous and clear-voiced appraisement of "recent" poets like Whitman, Carpenter, Tagore, A. E., Phillips, and W. B. Yeats. Whitman is not unnaturally given the largest amount of space and Sri Aurobindo interprets his poetry and his art with great vividness. One of the most luminous passages in the whole book is the one in which Sri Aurobindo elaborates an unexpected, but very convincing, comparison between Homer and Whitman:

"Whitman's aim is consciously, clearly, professedly to make a great revolution in the whole method of poetry, and if anybody could have succeeded, it ought to have been this giant of poetic thought with his energy of diction, this

1. *The Future Poetry*, Chapter on "The Poets of the Dawn."

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spiritual crowned athlete and vital prophet of democracy, liberty and the soul of man and Nature and all humanity. He is a great poet, one of the greatest in the power of his substance, the energy of his vision, the force of his style, the largeness at once of his personality and his universality. His is the most Homeric voice since Homer, in spite of the modern's less elevated æsthesis of speech and the difference between that limited Olympian and this broad-souled Titan, in this that he has the nearness to something elemental which makes everything he says, even the most common and prosaic, sound out with a ring of greatness, gives a force even to his barest or heaviest phrases, throws even upon the coarsest, dullest, most physical things something of the divinity; and he has the elemental Homeric power of sufficient straightforward speech, the rush too of oceanic sound though it is here the surging of the Atlantic between the continents, not the magic roll and wash of the Ægean around the isles of Greece. What he has not, is the unfailing poetic beauty and nobility which saves greatness from its defects—that supreme gift of Homer and Valmiki—and the self-restraint and obedience to a divine law which makes even the gods more divine."[1]

Since these articles were written during the last

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war, Sri Aurobindo had no opportunity of commenting on the work of Hopkins, Eliot, Auden, the later Yeats, D. H. Lawrence and the rest of the "moderns." But even with all the limitations—he had, for instance, to judge "recent" poetry mainly on the basis of the quotations in Mr. Cousins's book—he laboured under, Sri Aurobindo has given us in the four or five chapters devoted to "Recent English Poetry" an intensely personal and hence very helpful account of some of the major currents in the poetry of the "recent past."

Having thus admirably and illuminatingly surveyed the "course" of English poetry from the Anglo-Saxons and Chaucer to Whitman and Yeats, Sri Aurobindo discusses the possibilities of the future. He believes that the day is not so far off as we imagine when the rending of the veil that obscures the vision of present Mind will be accomplished at last and the new poet will hymn his songs in the voice of the inmost spirit and truth of things; when he will achieve the beginningless, eternal, ineffable rhythms of the spirit,—poetic recordations charged with the triune glories of the Beautiful, the Good and the True, but wholly free from the blemish of personality or mortality. The intellectual idea of man's unity with man and man's intimate relation with Nature, psychic responses and experiences on the basis of this intellectual idea, and a language elastic and powerful enough for the expression of the idea and the

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responses and the experiences,—these things some of the "recent" poets have given us indeed; but "the pouring of a new and greater self-vision of man and Nature and existence into the idea and the life is the condition of the completeness of the coming poetry."[1] The idea and the response and the experience are very creditable things in themselves; but they have yet to pass into a complete spiritual realization, they have yet to imprint themselves indelibly in the deeper consciousness of the race, they have still to acquire a natural and general currency in human thought and feeling.

This is the vision, this the experience, this the realization; these alone can effect in their conjunction the inauguration of a great forward movement in the history of poetry. The genuine "futurist" poet—for instance, the Sri Aurobindo of *Thought the Paraclete* and *Rose of God* and other recent poems—may give a sense of direction and suggestion of achievement to the new movement; but "the Future Poetry" will not prevail on a large or effective scale in our midst so long as humanity does not succeed in energizing its consciousness on a more comprehensive and universal basis than obtains now. But we need not despair; the signs are not unpropitious; and the Promised Land itself may be sighted in the far horizons of even our limited consciousness:

1. *The Future Poetry*, "Conclusion."

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"It is in effect a larger cosmic vision, a realizing of the godhead in the world and in man, of his divine possibilities as well as of the greatness of the power that manifests in what he is, a spiritualized uplifting of his thought and feeling and sense and action, a more developed psychic mind and heart, a truer and deeper insight into his nature and the meaning of the world, a calling of diviner potentialities and more spiritual values into the intention and structure of his life that is to call upon humanity, the prospect offered to it by the slowly unfolding and now more clearly disclosed Self of the universe. The nations that most include and make real these things in their life and culture are the nations of the coming dawn and the poets of whatever tongue and race who most completely see with this vision and speak with the inspiration of its utterance are those who shall be the creators of the poetry of the future."[1]

II

Sri Aurobindo has been writing poetry during the past three decades of his retired life in Pondicherry, just as he was writing poetry both in the early Baroda period and in the few active years of political life; apart from the manuscripts unfortunately lost consequent on the "house-searches,

1. *The Future Poetry*, "Conclusion."

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trials, hasty displacements and other vicissitudes of those years of political action," the rest of Sri Aurobindo's pre-Pondicherry poetical works (at any rate, most of them) have been included in the *Collected Poems and Plays*, published in 1942. It appears "there is a great mass of poems written in the twenties and thirties and after"[1]; but, excepting for *Six Poems* and *Transformation and other poems* and the sixteen pieces included in the essay on Quantitative Metre as illustrative extracts, this great treasure-house of "futurist" and other poetry remains as yet a sealed thing to us. It is said Sri Aurobindo is completing an epic entitled, *Savitri : a Legend and a Symbol ;* and he has also written several scores of sonnets and lyrics, and many other poetic wholes and many more poetic fragments. We have thus merely a fraction of his recent poetical output to base a judgement upon ; but that is significant and inspiring enough and constitutes in itself a solid and unique achievement.

The section entitled "Nine Poems" in the second volume of the collected edition consists of pieces that occupy a roughly middle place in the evolution of Sri Aurboindo's poetic art. *The Mother of Dreams*, to which we have drawn the reader's attention in an earlier chapter, was composed in the Alipur jail, but its rhythms and images already

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, I, Publisher's Note.

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foreshadow the great achievements of the Pondicherry period. *The Birth of Sin*, *The Rakshasas*, *Kama* and *The Mahatmas : Kuthumi*, all belong in spirit and execution to the earlier rather than the later period. Although these poems have adequate thought-content, they are to be read and enjoyed rather as the expressions of particular movements of thought or plays of fancy. The language now acquires a far greater degree of pregnancy and suggestion of inevitability than is achieved in some of the poems of the Baroda period.

In *The Birth of Sin*, Sirioth and Lucifer discuss the causes of their undivine discontent (or is it also divine ?) ; Lucifer desires Power, he would like to enjoy an eternity of rule ; Sirioth, on the contrary, wants Love :

> To embrace, to melt and mix
> Two beings into one, to roll the spirit
> Tumbling into a surge of common joy.[1]

And when Power and Love meet in a wild and mad embrace,

> Sin, sin is born into the world, revolt
> And change, in Sirioth and in Lucifer,
> The evening and the morning star.[2]

Like Browning's *Caliban upon Setebos*, Sri Aurobindo's poem, *The Rakshasas*, is a poetic rendering

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 126.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 127.

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of a partial or imperfect theology. If Caliban constructs Setebos in his own image—

> Setebos, Setebos, and Setebos !
> ' Thinketh, He dwelleth i ' the cold of the moon.
> ' Thinketh He made it, with the sun to match,
> But not the stars ; the stars came otherwise—

so does Ravan, the Lord of Lanka :

> O Rakshasa Almighty, look on me,
> Ravan, the lord of all Thy Rakshasas,
> Give me Thy high command to smite Thy foes ;
> But most I would afflict, chase and destroy
> Thy devotees who traduce Thee, making Thee
> A God of Love.[1]

Thus " each such type and level of consciousness sees the Divine in its own image and its level in Nature is sustained by a differing form of the World-Mother."[2] *Kama* is a fine poetical rendering of another idea—the great truth that by passing beyond Desire and Ignorance one returns to the Bliss of Brahman ; by losing all, one could save all :

> They who abandon Me, shall to all time
> Clasp and possess ; they who pursue, shall lose.[3]

But by far the most amazing and the most wonderfully evocative of the " Nine Poems " is *Ahana*—a long poem of rhymed hexameters. First

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 133.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 132.
3. *Ibid.*, II, p. 136.

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published in 1915, but perhaps written much earlier, *Ahana* has since been considerably enlarged and revised; it can therefore be looked upon as something of a palimpsest, a convenient bridge between the two great phases of Sri Aurobindo's poetical career. *Ahana* is the "Dawn of God" and her advent is the occasion for universal rejoicings; the "Hunters of Joy" now sing a "Song of Honour" replete with innumerable evocations of sound and colour and inwrought with felicities of *dhwani* that strangely echo in one's ears for ever. Perhaps, the poem is just a little too long; the inspiration now and then flags a little and poetry gives place to padding,—but this is, after all, inevitable in a long poem. And yet which modern poet has given us lines more nobly articulate than these:

Deep in our being inhabits the voiceless invisible Teacher;
Powers of his godhead we live; the Creator dwells in the creature.
Out of his Void we arise to a mighty and shining existence,
Out of Inconscience, tearing the black Mask's giant resistance;
Waves of his consciousness well from him into these bodies: in Nature,
Forms are put round him; his oneness, divided by mind's nomenclature,
High on the summits of being ponders immobile and single,
Penetrates atom and cell as the tide drenches sand-grain and shingle.
Oneness unknown to us dwells in these millions of figures and faces,

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Wars with itself in our battles, loves in our clinging embraces,
Inly the self and the substance of things and their cause and their mover
Veiled in the depths which the foam of our thoughts and our life's billows cover,
Heaves like the sea in its waves; like heaven with its starfires it gazes
Watching the world and its works.....[1]
Form of the formless All-Beautiful, lodestar of Nature's aspirance,
Music of prelude giving a voice to the ineffable Silence,
First white dawn of the God-Light cast on these creatures that perish,
Word-key of a divine and eternal truth for mortals to cherish,
Come! let thy sweetness and force be a breath in the breast of the future
Making the god-ways alive, immortality's golden-red suture:
Deep in our lives there shall work out a honeyed celestial leaven,
Bliss shall grow native to being and earth be a kin-soil to heaven.
Open the barriers of Time, the world with thy beauty enamour....
Vision delightful alone on the peaks whom the silences cover,
Vision of bliss, stoop down to mortality, lean to thy lover.[2]

Science and philosophy, thought and magic, introspection and interrogation, fact and myth and symbolism, hope and aspiration and ecstasy, all

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, pp. 150-1.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 162.

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course through *Ahana's* universe of melody with a dizzy velocity—but the result is poetry. The dactyls and the spondees and the closing trochees give this torrential poem a Niagara-like strength and headlong rapidity of motion. Now and then, and anon and again, the resounding cataract crystallizes into pearl-like images and captivating evocations :

Brooded out drama and epic, structured the climb of the sonnet....[1]
Bliss is her goal, but her road is through whirlwind and death-blast and storm-race.
All is wager and danger, all is a chase and a battle....[2]
Memories linger, lines from the past like a half-faded tracing.....[3]
Fearless is there life's play ; I shall sport with my dove from his highlands,
Drinking her laughter of bliss like a God in my Grecian islands.
Life in my limbs shall grow deathless, flesh with the God-glory tingle,
Lustre of Paradise, light of the earth-ways marry and mingle.[4]

Studded with such iridescent lightnings, *Ahana* is one long thunder and fascination of music, irresistible, life-giving, and overpowering.

Although the hexameter is normally rhymeless,

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 146.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 152.
3. *Ibid.*, II, p. 154.
4. *Ibid.*, II, p. 160-1.

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Ahana throughout rhymes and chimes to perfection. The history of English poetry is strewn with unsuccessful attempts to acclimatize the sensitive and subtly individual rhythms of the hexameter to the ruggeder climate of English verse. Tennyson has described English hexameters in this derisive parody :

When was a harsher sound ever heard, ye Muses, in England ?
When did a frog coarser croak upon our Helicon ?
Hexameters no worse than daring Germany gave us,
Barbarous experiment, barbarous hexameters.

But it is highly doubtful if Tennyson would have stood by this generalization if he had had a chance of reading *Ahana* or *Dawn over Ilion.* In these two magnificently articulate poems, Sri Aurobindo has put into practice his own " sound and realistic theory " of true quantity. At first one's tongue makes a slip, one is taken aback, one wonders if all is as it should be ; one perseveres again, and perhaps a third time,—and now one's tongue knows the pace, one's ear pleasurably responds to the seductive hexameters, and one knows that Sri Aurobindo has really " done the deed." Here are the opening lines of *Ahana,* scanned as English hexameters :

Vision de|lightful a|lone on the | hills whom the | silences |
cover,
Closer yet | lean to mor|tality ; | human, | stoop to thy | lover.

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Wonderful, | gold like a | moon in the | square of the | sun
where thou | strayest
Glimmers thy | face amid | crystal | purities ; | mighty thou |
playest
Sole on the | peaks of the | world, unafraid of thy |
loneliness. | Glances
Leap from thee | down to us, | dream-seas and | light-falls
and | magical | trances ;
Sun-drops | flake from thy | eyes and the | heart's caverns |
packed are with | pleasure
Strange like a | song without | words or the | dance of a |
measureless | measure.[1]

It will be noticed that cretic, molossus and anti-bacchius are used as modulations or substitutes for the dactyl.

In *Dawn over Ilion*,[2] Sri Aurobindo produces the effect of magic and melody even without the aid of rhymes ; apparently, what he does not know and what he has not done in the matter of variation is not worth knowing or worth doing ; but, as he reminds us, " all these minutiæ are part of the technique and the possibilities of the hexameter."[3] It is, however, beyond the scope of the present

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 141.
2. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 375-385.
3. *Ibid.*, II, p. 358.

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study to go into greater detail regarding Sri Aurobindo's theory and practice of quantitative verse technique.[1]

III

Six Poems, Transformation and other Poems and the sixteen pieces that are printed at the end of *Collected Poems and Plays* alone now remain to be considered. These recent poems are an attempt, not only to adapt classical quantitative metres to English verse, but also to achieve in English something equivalent to the *mantra*. Mystical experience, being by its very nature untranslatable in terms of logical categories, has perforce to borrow significance from the use of words and rhythms as symbols of, and as intimations from, something above and beyond themselves and at the same time as something springing up from the mystic's inmost psychic depths, deeper than ever plummet sounded. The great mystic poets of the world are thus inveterately "obscure," trafficking in symbols that perplex all except the initiated or chosen few who are able or willing to catch the lucent rays that emanate from the supernal Light. Such poetry has but rarely been achieved in the past—especially in English. It is, however, Sri Aurobindo's considered view, as we have explained already in the

1. An attempt has been made in the Appendix to study in detail Sri Aurobindo's handling of the *hendecasyllabics* in his *Thought the Paraclete.*

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first section, that the future poetry—even or especially in English—will more and more approximate to the *mantra ;* it will minimize if not altogether eliminate the operations of meddling middlemen—the intellect, the senses, even the imagination—and it will effect in one swift unfailing step the business of communication from the poet to the reader. As Sri Aurobindo has beautifully put it :

> " A divine Ananda, a delight interpretative, creative, revealing, formative,—one might almost say, an inverse reflection of the joy which the universal Soul has felt in its great release of energy when it rang out into the rhythmic forms of the universe the spiritual truth, the large interpretative idea, the life, the power, the emotion of things packed into its original creative vision,—such spiritual joy is that which the soul of the poet feels and which, when he can conquer the human difficulties of his task, he succeeds in pouring also into all those who are prepared to receive it."[1]

Sri Aurobindo would seem to have almost succeeded in conquering " the human difficulties of his task " and the " futurist " poems that he has given us—albeit they are but a mere fraction of his actual output—constitute the culmination of his long and arduous poetic career.

Nevertheless, these recent poems have puzzled

1. *The Future Poetry*, Chapter on " The Essence of Poetry."

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most readers, not only on account of their "obscurity," but also because they either handle classical metres to which we are not ordinarily accustomed or they are couched in rhythms that seem at first to sway uncertainly and confusingly between the rigid patterns of classical English prosody and the chaotic vagaries of modernist free verse. It will, however, be a vulgar mistake if a reader, after looking into either the essay on "Quantitative Metre" or the notes to *Six Poems*, rashly concluded that these poems are no more than a prosodist's experiments in quantity. It is true Sri Aurobindo has given a great deal of attention to the technical perfection of his poems; but this need not trouble us, for as he once wrote to a disciple:

> "The search for technique is simply the search for the best and most appropriate form for expressing what has to be said and once it is found the inspiration can flow quite naturally and fluently into it. There can be no harm therefore in attention to technique so long as there is no inattention to substance."

When the substance (which, of course, includes *bhava*) is adequate and when technique leads to art rather than degenerates into trickery, we have a true poem and not an idle experiment in verse; and Sri Aurobindo's "recent" poems are without the shadow of a doubt, alike in their substance and articulation, truly quintessential poetry.

As for "obscurity," it is apparently there, but

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it is unavoidably there. Poetry is always the expression of a mood or a movement of thought or a unit of experience in an outer objective or an inner subjective or spiritual world. We can condemn a poet if he makes—as do some of our ultra-modernists—obscurity or unintelligibility the ruling principle of his poetry. But, as Mr. Aldous Huxley reminds us, "obscurity in poetry is by no means always to be avoided. Shakespeare, for example, is one of the most difficult authors. He often writes obscurely, for the good reason that he often has subtle and uncommon thoughts to put into words."[1] Who has yet completely understood the "To be or not to be" speech in *Hamlet*? And a poet has the same right to coin his unique spiritual adventures into imperishable poetry even as he has the right to turn deftly his emotional responses into an elegy or a song or an ode. All that we can legitimately demand from the poet is that he should be as lucid as his particular subject will permit him to be. The point has been neatly clarified in a recent article in the *Times Literary Supplement*:

> "As writing is designed to be read, it is evidently a merit in it to enable, rather than to impede, the reader's understanding, but it is true also that lucidity is not an absolute but a relative virtue—relative to the reader's sympathy and to the complexity and remoteness from ordinary experience of the thought or vision to

1. *Texts and Pretexts*, p. 220.

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be communicated. If we find Scott's verse more lucid than, say, Blake's, we are by no means entitled to reproach Blake with failure in lucidity. The question is: is he as lucid as possible under the circumstances?.... The man who is willingly obscure is a charlatan; the man who is obscure, though his matter be small, is an incompetent; but let us not pass judgement hastily. A new secret may demand a new idiom, and we must have ears to hear it."[1]

And the mystic has a "secret" to impart and he is often compelled to invent his own idiom and even his own rhythms. Spiritual experiences being *per se* ineffable are for that very reason incommunicable through the medium of our everyday vocabulary. And yet such experiences are dear to the heart of man, and he would gladly clutch at the intangible and capture and retain it (if he could!) as a part of himself. That is why we cherish in our heart's tabernacle revelations like Francis Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven* or Sri Aurobindo's *Rose of God* and *Thought the Paraclete*. We love them, we cherish them, we tap them from time to time to draw forth momentary solace, —but do we *understand* them in every particular, do we gauge the plenty in every crevice or sense the significance of every turn of thought and every shade of colour? We do attempt to reproduce

1. July 3, 1943.

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intellectually the poet's spiritual experience, but the images that we construct in our minds will be but a lifeless façade, a grandiose proxy bloated with mere mental stuff; the experience *as such* is unfortunately denied to most of us, and hence we blink pathetically in our bewilderment when the poet describes the thrills he has braved, the splendours he has glimpsed, the vast beatitudes he has been.

Our doubts and difficulties and bewilderments will, however, tend to disappear if we approach the poems without preconceived notions of what poetry and metre should or should not be; in other words, if we read the poems to ourselves, slowly and deliberately, keeping our physical no less than our inward ear open, and sheathing for the nonce our intellect's razor-edge. If one reads thus a poem like *The Bird of Fire*—

Gold-white wings a throb in the vastness, the bird of flame
went
glimmering over a sunfire curve to the haze of the west,
Skimming, a messenger sail, the sapphire-summer waste
of a soundless wayless burning sea.
Now in the eve of the waning world the colour and
splendour returning
drift through a blue-flicker air back to my breast,
Flame and shimmer staining the rapture-white foam-vest
of the waters of Eternity[1]—

one will learn to discover in its unmanageably long

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 279.

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lines and their abundant load of polysyllables and unusual word-combinations an approximation to the primordial music

> Such as the meeting soul may pierce
> In notes, with many a winding bout
> Of linked sweetness long drawn out.[1]

One can then read the other poems, feel a quickening of one's pulses, share with Sri Aurobindo the " vision splendid," re-live his experiences (even in our limited mental worlds), and learn to repeat to the darkness and the stars potent *mantras* such as :

> My mind is awake in a stirless trance,
> Hushed my heart, a burden of delight ;
> Dispelled is the senses' flicker-dance,
> Mute the body aureate with light.....[2]

> A Bliss surrounds with ecstasy everlasting,
> An absolute high-seated immortal rapture
> Possesses, sealing love to oneness
> In the grasp of the All-beautiful, All-beloved..[3]

> My soul unhorizoned widens to measureless sight,
> My body is God's happy living tool,
> My spirit a vast sun of deathless light....[4]

> Earth is now girdled with trance and Heaven is put round her for vesture.
> Wings that are brilliant with fate sleep at Eternity's gate.

1. Milton, *L'Allegro.*
2. *Collected Poems and Plays,* II, p. 280.
3. *Ibid.,* II, p. 285.
4. *Ibid.,* II, p. 297.

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Time waits, vacant, the Lightning that kindles, the Word
that transfigures :
Space is a stillness of God building his earthly abode...[1]

I saw the spirit of the cosmic Ignorance ;
I felt its power besiege my gloried fields of trance..[2]

These lines, and indeed the poems in which they occur, are the sheer distillations of poetry ; they all aspire (to quote M. Abbe Bremond, though written in a very different connection and, perhaps, in a different sense as well), " each by the mediation of its proper magic, words, notes, colours, lines—they all aspire to joint prayer."[3] It were sacrilege to analyze the literary art that has evolved, after a lifetime of arduous metrical as well as spiritual discipline, such splendorous poetic creations.[4] One can attempt to scan the lines, enumerate the alliterative devices, explain an image here and a metaphor there, cite parallel quotations from *The Life Divine* and other works, elucidate (if one can) the colour symbolism and sound-associations,—but one is not any nearer solving the eternal riddle that all great poetry is or any nearer reducing Sri Aurobindo's recent poetry into negotiable systems and formulæ. Lines like " a quiver and colour of crimson flame "

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 363.
2. From an unpublished poem.
3. Quoted by Garrod in his *The Profession of Poetry*, p. 39.
4. Nevertheless, an attempt has been made in the Appendix to study the metre, form and thought-content of *Thought the Paraclete* in considerable detail. In the same manner Sri Aurobindo's other " recent " poems also may be " elucidated."

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or " in that diamond heart the fires undrape "[1] or " the Eternal is broken into fleeting lives "[2] or " Time is my drama or my pageant dream "[3] or " a dance of fire-flies in the fretted gloom "[4] or " and the gold god and the dream boat come not "[5] or "and a huddle of melancholy hills in the distance"[6] —such lines are just miracles, miracles like the birth of the sun or the blossoming of spring or the sweetness of honey ; they are there, they are ours, and let's bind them to our souls with " hoops of steel " !

Poetry, said M. Bremond, is characteristically a mystic incantation, allied to joint prayer ; one has just this feeling when one is listening to, or participating in, a recitation or chanting of the *Purusha Sukta* or a hymn from the *Sama Veda*. Likewise when one reads Sri Aurobindo's *Rose of God*—as perfect a " Hymn " in the English mould as could be imagined—one knows that here rhythm and phrase and music have coalesced into an utter harmony ; and even as one slowly reads it—for the tenth or for the hundredth time—one feels

> The melting voice through mazes running ;
> Untwisting all the chains that tie
> The hidden soul of harmony.[7]

1, *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 281.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 284.
3. *Ibid.*, II, p. 297.
4. *Ibid.*, II, p. 299.
5. *Ibid.*, II, p. 366.
6. *Ibid.*, II, p. 371.
7. Milton, *L'Allegro*.

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And so one's enraptured ear demands that the strains be repeated again and again; and one is content to chant the poem as often as one likes and let its music and its meaning sink deep into one's soul's recesses, there to abide for ever :

Rose of God, vermilion stain on the sapphires of heaven,
Rose of Bliss, fire-sweet, seven-tinged with the ecstasies seven!
Leap up in our heart of humanhood, O miracle, O flame,
Passion-flower of the Nameless, bud of the mystical Name.

Rose of God, great wisdom-bloom on the summits of being,
Rose of Light, immaculate core of the ultimate seeing!
Live in the mind of our earthhood; O golden Mystery, flower,
Sun on the head of the Timeless, guest of the marvellous Hour.

Rose of God, damask force of Infinity, red icon of might,
Rose of Power with thy diamond halo piercing the night!
Ablaze in the will of the mortal, design the wonder of thy plan,
Image of Immortality, outbreak of the Godhead in man.

Rose of God, smitten purple with the incarnate divine Desire,
Rose of Life, crowded with petals, colour's lyre!
Transform the body of the mortal like a sweet and magical rhyme;
Bridge our earthhood and heavenhood, make deathless the children of Time.

Rose of God like a blush of rapture on Eternity's face,
Rose of Love, ruby depth of all being, fire-passion of Grace!

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Arise from the heart of the yearning that sobs in Nature's abyss :
Make earth the home of the Wonderful and life Beatitude's kiss.[1]

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 302.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE YOGA AND THE ASRAM

I

If Sri Aurobindo and his two collaborators had planned as it were to storm humanity into accepting the gospel of the Life Divine following the lead of the *Arya*, they were doomed indeed to disappointment; the circulation of the *Arya* had, owing to the exigencies of the War, been more or less necessarily limited to India; and even in India, how many were really willing to impose on themselves the continuous intellectual strain that Sri Aurobindo demanded from them? No doubt, the magazine was received and preserved with great reverence by a "fit audience though few"; young men in colleges wished earnestly to understand Sri Aurobindo's message and try to live it; and even those who were not quite as enthusiastic as these young men knew that *Arya* was trying to deliver a new message to the world, a message that will create a genuine "Brave New World" in our midst. In any case, when the *Arya* ceased publication, Sri Aurobindo must have begun considering the whole question afresh with a view to discovering, if possible, other ways of educating humanity and exhorting it to rise

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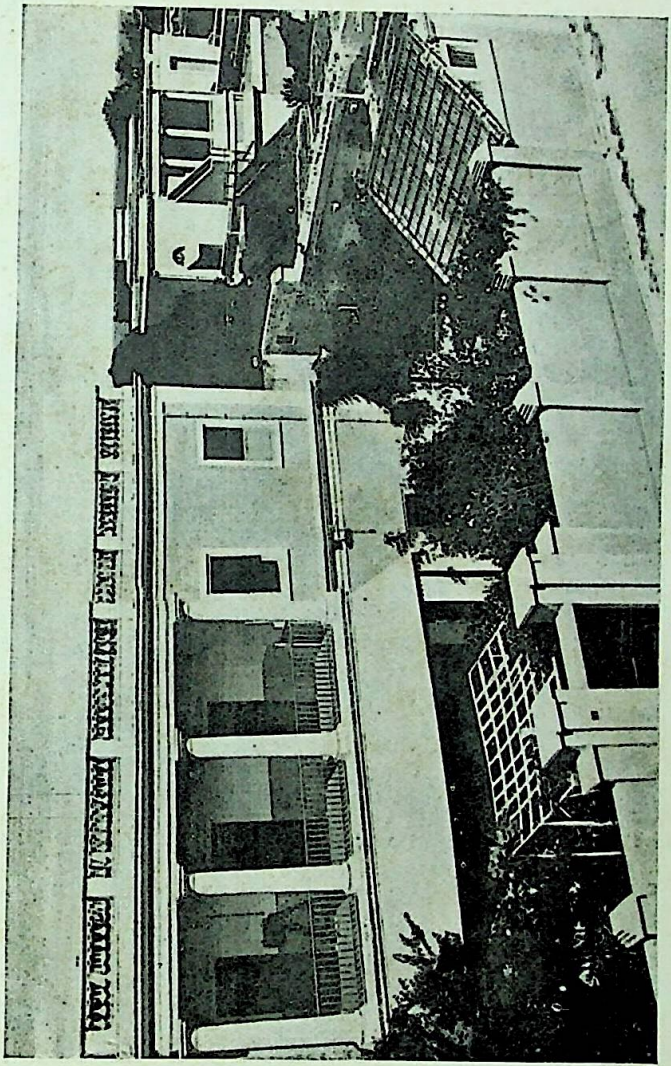

THE ASRAM [*one view*]

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to the height of its great future in a perfected and divinized world.

Meanwhile the War had come to an end and, after an interregnum of a couple of years when men and women merely resigned themselves to a mood of tired or unbalanced relaxation, the world strove to return again to "normalcy," and humanity appeared to be not unwilling to discuss the "eternal" questions. In externals, the world still seemed a pitiful prey to conflicting and chaotic interests; men and women, especially those who seemed doomed to spend their lives in crowded and sooty cities, moaned the hurt they had suffered, the felicity that appeared to have passed away for ever from their lives. The sophisticated intellectuals of either sex, the Bright Young Things and the Brown Elderly Wrecks, the "hollow men" and the "stuffed men," the Prufrocks and the decayed ladies of the post-war world of the twenties, were all unhappy creatures to whom life was merely a rat's alley, a waste land, a hideous existence made up of prickly-pear, bits of bones, and pursuing shadows.

This was the mood which found its piercing articulation in works like James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot's *Hollow Men* and *The Waste Land.* And not only the broken and empty men of the disillusioned West but even Indian youths, recoiling from the death-stare of utter frustration or writhing under the unescapable vulgarity of so-called "civilized" life or maddened by the vicissitudes of

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our national and communal politics,—thus the modern man and the modern woman, of the East no less than of the West, alike felt the flutter of despairing thoughts, and they all found in Mr. Eliot a faithful and powerful Laureate :

This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.[1]

The idea would not solidify into reality but vaporized instead ; the motion would not realize itself in the act but was paralyzed instead ; the conception and the emotion were arrested at the start and would not lead to creation nor summon the proper response :

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow.[2]

With such a dismal and deathly prospect facing them in whichever direction they turned their eyes, these unhappy men and women, these sensitive humans, raised their despairing voice to God or

1. *The Hollow Men.*
2. *Ibid.*

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whatever gods there be to send down the life-giving rains of Faith. The roots of life were quickly drying up and men pathetically cried with Hopkins—Send our roots rain !

And some—a mere handful at the beginning—who had been carefully reading Sri Aurobindo's inordinately long sequence, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, felt a wrenching turn in their lives—it gave them pain, it gave them joy, it gave them the pain of struggle, it gave them the joy of hope—and, making up their minds once and for all, they boarded the boat or the train—in either case a "celestial omnibus" —to Pondicherry. There was no Asram then in Pondicherry—not as yet ; a few people, those who had boldly boarded the omnibus, had come to Sri Aurobindo—from Bengal, from Gujarat, from Tamil Nad, from the north and the south, and even from abroad—and, under his immediate guidance, they were practising Yoga. In the meantime, the Mother, after a long stay in France and Japan, returned to Pondicherry on the 24th April, 1920. The number of disciples now showed a tendency to increase rather rapidly. The residence of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and their disciples then gradually assumed the complexion of a Yogasram, more from the wish of the sadhakas who desired to entrust their whole inner and outer life to the Mother than from any intention or plan of hers or of Sri Aurobindo. When the Asram began to develop, it fell to the Mother to organize it on a

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durable and healthy and all-comprehensive basis; Sri Aurobindo himself retired presently into complete seclusion and hence the whole material and spiritual charge of the Asram devolved on the Mother.

By and by, fresh buildings were acquired or built or rented for the Asram; arrangements were made for the satisfactory boarding and lodging of both the inmates or sadhakas of the Asram and the increasing number of visitors to it; and, above all, a technique —at once elastic and potent and universal in application—was devised for the spiritual guidance of the disciples. It can, however, be truly remarked that the Sri Aurobindo Asram "has less been created than grown around him as its centre."[1]

II

Before describing the Yogasram at Pondicherry in greater detail, we might here indicate, however briefly and however sweepingly, the underlying principles of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga. In his great book, *The Life Divine*, he told his readers that the "Life Divine"—the *satyayuga*, the new heaven and new earth—was a consummation devoutly to be desired; and that it could be—and one day anyhow would be—realized even in this terrestrial world of the dichotomies and the dualities. In the complementary treatise, *The Synthesis of Yoga*,

1. *Sri Aurobindo, a Life Sketch*, p. 14.

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—a massive book considerably even more voluminous than *The Life Divine*—Sri Aurobindo told his readers: "Well, *this is how* you should reach the goal of the Life Divine, the goal of Supermanhood and Supernature"!

Sri Aurobindo begins this great sequence with the motto: "All life is Yoga"[1]; there are three rungs in the ladder of life which it is man's destiny to ascend one by one; and bodily life, mental life, and divine life are these three steps that God and Nature have devised for aspiring man. Man too has sprung up from inconscient Matter; Life and Mind, that are in a deep swoon in Matter, are awake in Man; and now it is the burden of his greatness—it is the stern law governing his evolutionary status—that he should strive to awaken the slumbering "soul" within and reach up in one vast whirl of endeavour to the divinity, to the Supermind, incidentally or consequentially lifting Nature itself to the level of Supernature. This, then, is to be the mechanics of his Yoga:

> "Yoga is that which, having found the Transcendent, can return upon the universe and possess it, retaining the power freely to descend as well as ascend the great stair of existence."[2]

It need hardly be emphasized that there have been innumerable Yogis in India in the past just

1. *Arya*, I, August 1914.
2. *Ibid.*, II, September 1914.

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as there are several Yogis even in the India of to-day. Likewise several systems of Yoga have prevailed and still do prevail in this country—Raja Yoga, Hatha Yoga, etc.; but Yoga in India may be said to have pursued only three main paths, known respectively as *Jnana marga*, *Bhakti marga*, and *Karma marga*. Although the *Gita* has been explained by various commentators as if it advocated one of the three classical paths to the exclusion of the others, it is clear, as Sri Aurobindo has shown in his *Essays on the Gita*, that the Yoga taught by the *Gita* is essentially integral in character, its aim being *atmasiddhi* by means of a total self-surrender and self-consecration to the Divine.

Sri Aurobindo calls his Yoga by various names—Supramental Yoga, Purna Yoga, Integral Yoga; but the names should not mislead us. One may ask the question if the *Gita's* "way" may not also be described as "integral" or "purna" Yoga. Or one may ask if real *siddhi* is possible in any Yoga so long as one does not touch the level of the Supermind—it is, of course, immaterial whether or not it is actually called the supramental level—and link oneself up with Sachchidananda. Thus it is possible—fatally possible—to misinterpret the name and misjudge the nature of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga. We shall now try, as far as possible in his own words, to explain *why* he calls his Yoga "integral," "new," and "supramental" Yoga.

"The principle of Yoga," says Sri Aurobindo,

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" is the turning of one or of all powers of our human existence into a means of reaching the divine Being. In an ordinary Yoga one main power of being or one group of its powers is made the means, vehicle, path. In a synthetic Yoga, all powers will be combined and included in the transmuting instrumentation."[1] It is, in the language of modern military strategy, an all-out attack—an attack involving the use of the army, the navy and the air force —to storm the citadel of the enemy ; likewise, in an integral or synthetic Yoga, the storm troops of the muscle, the swift squadrons of the brain, and the flotillas of the heart, all will be energized and directed to storm and seize the citadel—the invisible citadel—of Reality. All roads may ultimately lead to Rome ; but a pincer has apparently greater chances of success and a three-pronged movement an absolute certainty of success. It would appear that this is the lesson underlying the strategy of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga :

> " Each Yoga in its process has the character of the instrument it uses ; thus the Hathayogic process is psycho-physical, the Rajayogic mental and psychic, the way of knowledge is spiritual and cognitive, the way of devotion spiritual, emotional and æsthetic, the way of works spiritual and dynamic by action....but all power is in the end one, all power is really soul-power."[2]

1. *Arya*, V, p. 283.
2. *Ibid.*, V, p. 283.

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Since all is soul-power, this power should be mobilized on a total basis ; then alone would the victory be a near and assured thing. All the powers of the human frame should be thus energized and disciplined into a body of troops filled with the zeal and imbued with the determination to invade Reality, to possess it, to bring it down ; all the approaches to It should in like manner be filled with the armoured cars of man's one-pointed acts, aspirations, hymns of love ; and success will follow " as night the day."

We can now see why Sri Aurobindo calls his Yoga " synthetic " or " integral." But is not the *Gita's* way also " synthetic " and " integral" ? Didn't Ramanuja and his followers also advocate a linking up of the three paths and didn't they even add a fourth, *prapatti marga* ?[1] Didn't the Tantrik siddhas base their sadhana on their synthetic view of human life ? When Sri Aurobindo maintains that an absolute and serene peace and calm is the *sine qua non* on which alone the sadhaka can build his palace of realization, is he saying anything so very different from what a Buddha or a Sankara said so many centuries ago ? How does the absolute and serene calm that Sri Aurobindo speaks of differ from the Buddhistic *nirvana* or the Virasaiva conception of *bayalu nirbayalu* ?

1. *Vide* P. N. Srinivasachari's *The Philosophy of Visishtadvaita*, pp. 304-411.

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THE ASRAM [*another view from the street*]

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Sri Aurobindo's Yoga is synthetic, professedly synthetic; and divers threads have woven themselves into this intricate fabric, many chords have entered and fused into this realm of harmony. Sri Aurobindo has not created his Yoga out of an impossible vacuum; he has drawn freely from the wisdom of the ages, he has drunk deep in the twin streams of the Vedanta and the Tantra. But while all the known systems of Yogic discipline placed before themselves only the aim of man's salvation as an individual—the aim of reaching to the regions of the spirit and getting rid, once and for all, of the weary weight of all this unintelligible world, escaping for all eternity from the fatuity and misery of terrestrial life, in other words disengaging oneself from the tiger-clasp of *samsara*—the aim of Sri Aurobindo's *supramental* Yoga is, not only to seize the Supermind, but also to bring it down to our earth life, to make it henceforth the impulse and the law, the motion and the act, the idea and the reality, of every segment of our terrestrial life.

We can thus distinguish between three possible levels in our earthly existence: the life in the ignorance; the life that the Lord of the *Gita* described to Arjuna; and the life that we might live if we hearkened to Sri Aurobindo. These three levels—or, if you will, these three steps in the stair of Yoga—are thus briefly described by Sri Aurobindo:

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"The ordinary life consists in work for personal aim and satisfaction of desire under some mental or moral control, touched sometimes by a mental ideal. The *Gita's* Yoga consists in the offering of one's work as a sacrifice to the Divine, the conquest of desire, egoless and desireless action, bhakti for the Divine, and entering into the cosmic consciousness, the sense of unity with all creatures, oneness with the Divine. This Yoga (*i.e.*, Sri Aurobindo's Yoga) adds the bringing down of the supramental Light and Force and (its ultimate aim) the transformation of Nature."[1]

It will be seen from the above that the Supramental or Vijnana Yoga aims at nothing less than a radical reorganization—a divine transformation—not of individual consciousness alone but even of the earth-consciousness itself. That is why it can justifiably be called both an "integral" and a "new" Yoga—the integrality consisting in the fact that it takes up the essence and adapts many of the processes of the older Yogas and the "newness" consisting in "its aim, standpoint and the totality of its method."[2] "The Vedic Rishis," says Sri Aurobindo, "never attained to the Supermind for the earth or perhaps did not even make the attempt."[3] In result, while the individual solved his own

1. *Lights on Yoga*, p. 72.
2. Letter to a disciple.
3. *The Riddle of this World*, p. 2.

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personal problem,—this might have happened frequently enough,—his consistent ignoration of the earth-crust left the world to its own fate. As the Mother once explained to her disciples :

> " An inner illumination that does not take any note of the body and the outer life, is of no great use ; for it leaves the world as it is. This is what has continually happened till now. Even those who had a very great and powerful realization withdrew from the world to live undisturbed in inner quiet and peace ; the world was left to its ways, and misery and stupidity, Death and Ignorance continued unaffected their reign on this material plane of existence....An ideal of this kind may be good for those who want it, but it is not our Yoga. For we want the divine conquest of this world, the conquest of all its movements and the realization of the Divine here."[1]

Other Yogas, even the most ambitious and integral of them, do not quite visualize the great aims placed before themselves and placed before their disciples by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother nor do they handle a method quite so all-comprehensive and uncompromising. As Sri Aurobindo wrote to a disciple eight years ago : " I have not found this method (as a whole) or anything like it professed or realized in the old Yogas. If I had,

1. *Conversations with the Mother*, pp. 29-30.

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I should not have wasted my time in hewing out paths and in thirty years of search and inner creation when I could have hastened home safely to my goal in an easy canter over paths already blazed out, laid down, perfectly mapped, macadamized, made secure and public."

It is, however, quite immaterial whether Sri Aurobindo's Yoga is called in one or another way or whether its claim to be a "new" Yoga is conceded or not; the essential thing is that its aims are worthy—to put the matter very mildly—and the method it pursues for the realization of its aims seems to promise (if Sri Aurobindo, the Mother and their disciples are to be believed) a reasonable certainty of early success. In the earlier stages, perhaps, Sri Aurobindo's Yoga may seem to be not so very different from others; but we are assured that the later stages of the Yoga "go into little known or untrodden regions"[1]; and, while the earlier stages of the Yoga are described with exactitude and particularity in books like *The Yoga and its Objects, The Riddle of this World, Lights on Yoga, Bases of Yoga* and, of course, in *The Synthesis of Yoga,* Sri Aurobindo has not so far made public the processes relating to the later stages of his Yoga.

Nor is Sri Aurobindo's Yoga at all allied to what is derisively called "mysticism and moonshine"; Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's writings reveal

1. Letter to a disciple.

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the fact that they are both fully cognizant of the latest researches in science and psychology. They had once been intellectuals themselves " insistent on practical results more than any Russell can be "; but their partial experiences and realizations had early facilitated their passage across the sea of philosophic doubt and subsequent safe landing on the shores of Faith. Sri Aurobindo wrote to Dilip about ten years ago explaining the standpoint of his Yoga in the following unambiguous words :

" We (Sri Aurobindo and the Mother) know well what is the difference between a subjective experience and a dynamic outgoing and realizing Force. So, although we have Faith—and whoever did anything great in the world without having faith in his mission or the Truth at work behind him ?—we do not found ourselves on Faith alone, but on a great ground of Knowledge which we have been developing and testing all our lives. I think I can say that I have been testing day and night for years upon years more scrupulously than any scientist his theory, his method, on the physical plane. That is why I am not alarmed by the aspect of the world around me or disconcerted by the often successful fury of the adverse forces who increase in their rage as the Light comes nearer and nearer to the field of earth and matter."

III

" Yoga siddhi," says Sri Aurobindo, " can be

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best attained by the combined working of four great instruments."[1] These four instruments are *Shastra, Utsaha, Guru,* and *Kala. Shastra* is a vague term; it is on the face of it a body of knowledge that helps the process and brings about the fact of realization; the scriptures, the hymns, the systems, "the flame-word rune," all are *shastra*; but Sri Aurobindo reminds us that "the supreme Shastra of the integral Yoga is the eternal Veda secret in the heart of every thinking and living being. The lotus of the eternal knowledge and the eternal perfection is a bud closed and folded up within us. It opens swifty or gradually, petal by petal, through successive realizations, once the mind of man begins to turn to the Eternal, once his heart, no longer compressed and confined by attachment to finite appearances, becomes enamoured, in whatever degree, of the Infinite." And when man is "enamoured" of the Infinite, he will surely and immediately evoke the appropriate response from Him; for, as Sri Aurobindo pithily puts it, "he who chooses the Infinite has been chosen by the Infinite." Nay more: we are already the Infinite in our secret and veiled nature and Yoga will change this inner

1. This and the following quotations in this section (unless otherwise indicated) are taken from the revised typescript version of the first six chapters of Sri Aurobindo's *The Synthesis of Yoga.* The first of these chapters was published in *The Indian Express* of August 15, 1940. The remaining chapters have not so far been published; but a French edition of the six chapters is available.

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fact into an open and conscious and fruitful reality : " All teaching is self-revealing, all becoming is an unfolding. Self-attainment is the secret ; self-knowledge and an increasing consciousness are the means and the process."

In the same manner, the supreme *guru* or teacher for the sadhaka of the integral Yoga is the Master " within us." An external *guru*, or even a Messiah like Christ or Krishna or Muhammad, is no doubt very helpful at the earlier stages of the Yoga. The sadhaka of the integral Yoga will shun sectarianism, the egoism and the arrogance that cry—" My God, my Incarnation, my Prophet, my Guru "!—and will not be satisfied " until he has included all other names and forms of Deity in his own conception, seen his own Ishta Devata in all others, unified all Avatars in the unity of Him who descends in the Avatar, welded the truth in all teachings into the harmony of the Eternal Wisdom."

Just as the supreme Shastra is " within," so the supreme Guru also is " within ": " It is He who destroys our darkness by the resplendent light of His knowledge ; that light becomes within us the increasing glory of His own self-revelation ....By the inpouring of His own influence and presence into us, He enables the individual being to attain to identity with the universal and transcendent."

The Shastra and the Master are both lodged " within " ourselves ; but we cannot as yet esta-

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blish connection with them; we cannot even recognize their existence; much less then can we hearken to their message or make it the basis of our realization in the individual, the cosmic and the supra-cosmic planes of existence. Here comes the need of *utsaha* or *sraddha* or the "decisive turn" that the sadhaka gives to the current of his life: "a great and wide spiritual and intelligent faith, intelligent with the intelligence of that larger reason which assents to high possibilities, is the character of the *sraddha* needed for the integral Yoga."[1] No doubt, even this *sraddha* or *utsaha* or "decisive turn" is not enough; *kala*, or the instrumentality of Time, is also needed. Only then will the aspiration from below be met by the Grace from above and bring about the great transformation. But while the instrumentality of Time cannot be bent according to the sadhaka's sweet will and pleasure, the turning of the current of his own life of aspiration and endeavour is in his own hands; and therefore "the first determining element of the *siddhi* is....the intensity of the turning, the force which directs the soul inward ....The ideal sadhaka should be able to say, in the Biblical phrase, 'My zeal for the lord has eaten me up"! The sadhaka should be able to cry from the depths of the heart as does the Mother in a

1. *Arya*, VI, p. 601.

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" prayer " like the following :

> " To be the divine love, love powerful, infinite, unfathomable, in every activity, in all the worlds of being—it is for this I cry to Thee, O Lord. Let me be consumed with this love divine, love powerful, infinite, unfathomable, in every activity, in all the worlds of being ! Transmute me into that burning brazier so that all the atmosphere of earth may be purified with its flame."[1]

In *The Mother*—the great little book that is both a Handbook of Yoga and a blaze of revelation—Sri Aurobindo has delivered the *Gita* of the integral Yoga. In it the " personal effort " required of the sadhaka is described with clarity and completeness ; and we therefore quote the relevant passage here in its entirety :

> " The personal effort required is a triple labour of aspiration, rejection and surrender,—an aspiration vigilant, constant, unceasing—the mind's will, the heart's seeking, the ascent of the vital being, the will to open and make plastic the physical consciousness and nature ; rejection of the movements of the lower nature—rejection of the mind's ideas, opinions, preferences, habits, constructions, so that the true knowledge may find free room in a silent mind,—rejection of the vital nature's desires, demands,

1. *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 51 ; p. 294 in the French Edition.

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cravings, sensations, passions, selfishness, pride, arrogance, lust, greed, jealousy, envy, hostility to the Truth, so that the true power and joy may pour from above into a calm, large, strong and consecrated vital being,—rejection of the physical nature's stupidity, doubt, disbelief, obscurity, obstinacy, pettiness, laziness, unwillingness to change, tamas, so that the true stability of Light, Power, Ananda may establish itself in a body growing always more divine ;

surrender of oneself and all one is and has and every plane of the consciousness and every movement to the Divine and the Shakti."[1]

Once the sadhaka is started—self-started—on the path of integral Yoga by the agency of his *utsaha* and personal effort, he can battle his way through thick and thin and reach his destination at the God-appointed time. " For me," confessed Sri Aurobindo in a letter to a disciple, " the path of Yoga has always been a battle as well as a journey, a thing of ups and downs, of light followed by darkness, followed by greater light "; but if the sadhaka is determined to reach the Divine and possess Him and be possessed by Him, " there is an absolute certitude " that it will all be achieved ultimately—and " that is the faith every sadhaka should have at the bottom of his heart, supporting him through

1. *The Mother*, pp. 11-13.

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every stumble and blow and ordeal."[1]

Sri Aurobindo roughly indicates three distinct stages in his integral Yoga. The first is that of "self-preparation," the period of effort when the sadhaka should endeavour to put forth the "triple labour of aspiration, rejection and surrender" described above in the extract from *The Mother*. The second will be a transitional stage between the human and the divine working; during this stage of the march, "there will supervene an increasing purified and vigilant passivity, a more and more luminous divine response to the Divine Force—but not to any other." In the third and culminating stage, "there is no effort at all, no set method, no fixed *sadhana*; the place of endeavour and *tapasya* will be taken by a natural, simple, powerful and happy disclosing of the flower of the Divine out of the bud of a purified and perfected terrestrial nature." All things are now perceived as God and "the crowning realization of this Yoga is when you become aware of the whole world as the expression, play or *lila* of an infinite divine personality, when you see in all, not the impersonal *Sad Atman* which is the basis of manifest existence,—although you do not lose that knowledge,—but Sri Krishna who at once is, bases and transcends all manifest and unmanifest existence, *avyakto vyaktat parah*."[2]

1. Letter to a Disciple (1934).
2. *The Yoga and its Objects*, p. 21.

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Or, as the Mother aptly describes the process and the aim of the integral Yoga: "What is required of you is not a passive surrender, in which you become like a block, but to put your will at the disposal of the Divine will.... The final aim is to be in constant union with the Divine, not only in meditation, but in all circumstances and in all the active life."[1]

But the "personal effort" comes first; it is only when this effort "delivers the goods" that further spurts of ascent in the great stair of Consciousness could be attempted with any fair prospects of success. And how difficult is this "triple labour" —how pertinaciously is its achievement thwarted by the siege of varied contraries—how easy is it to fall back and lose in an instant the gains of months and probably years! The "ego-sense" is a very tough customer; the mind is a wanton jade, it is a slippery cliff:

> O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
> Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
> May who ne'er hung there.[2]

The life-impulses and mind formations may easily betray the sadhaka into taking a wrong turning; and hence the ego-sense should first be put down with an iron hand. "The danger," says Sri Aurobindo, "can only be countered by the opening of a now

1. *Conversations with the Mother*, pp. 23, 25.
2. Gerard Manley Hopkins.

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nine-tenths concealed inmost soul....that is the inner light we must liberate ; for the light of this inmost soul is our one sure illumination so long as we walk still amidst the siege of the Ignorance and the Truth-Consciousness has not taken up the entire control of our Godward endeavour."

An all-comprehensive, total and radical change in the organization of our consciousness so that it may function as a self-luminous, self-purposive and all-powerful engine of knowledge and force and stainless bliss is, according to Sri Aurobindo, " not only the whole meaning, but, in an increasing force and by progressive stages, the whole method of the integral Yoga." This organization has to be realized as the culminating result of a three-fold movement—inward, towards the psychic being ; an ascent or an upward movement, reaching up to the Supermind ; a descent or a process of integration, or the downpour of the spirit to effectuate the supra-mentalization of our earth-nature. The sadhaka has to begin with the " inward " movement ; and then, in good time, the upward and the descending movements too will be possible ; and at long last all will fuse into the reality of Yoga siddhi. The purification and energization of the " inner " life is only the beginning ; but it is a necessary beginning. On its broad-based foundation can be reared, surely and securely, the superstructure of the integral Yoga : " It is therefore on the accomplishment of the ascent and the possibility of the full dynamism from the

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highest levels descending into the earth-consciousness that is dependent the justification of Life, its salvation, its transformation into a transfigured terrestrial Nature."

IV

The self-surrender to the Divine and the Shakti—the *sankalpa* of *atmasamarpana*—is thus the first, decisive and necessary turn that alone will help the sadhaka to pursue the integral Yoga with any fair prospect of success. The Divine and the Shakti, God and the Mother, Existence and Consciousness-Force, Narayana and Lakshmi, Purusha and Prakriti, Iswara and Iswari—these pairs connote the same identity in difference. The integral Yoga demands from the sadhaka a whole-hearted and total surrender to Her, to the Mother, and through Her to Him; but essentially they are one. Whatever is manifested, is His self-expression in Her; and She is filled with His being; to us, therefore, ultimately all is She, and all is He as well.

And yet the sadhaka has to approach Him through Her,—through the Mother; the *atmasamarpana* is accordingly made to the Mother in the first instance; an unreserved offering of all one is and has and every plane of one's consciousness and the entire *adhara* itself is to be made to the Mother—and, of course through Her, to Him also—"in order that She may, unobstructed by human reserves, prepare, purify, empty and refill it with the

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Divine Substance, and so set it that the Supramental may become the ruling principle of our life on earth."[1] The Mother's " grace " thus occupies a pivotal place in the integral Yoga; but, if the sadhaka's faith is well-grounded and if his aspiration is sincere and if, above all, his self-surrender is complete and final, the grace of the Divine Mother must inevitably—now or to-morrow—and irresistibly pour into his *adhara* life-giving and life-transforming nectar and the great aim of his endeavour will become an accomplished thing indeed.

The Divine Mother is truly " the divine Conscious Force that dominates all existence, one and yet so many-sided that to follow her movement is impossible even for the quickest mind and for the freest and most vast intelligence."[2] She—the Divine Mother—can be visualized in her transcendent, cosmic-universal, and individual manifestations; these are but " ways of being of the Mother " and all are resolved in the unity of the triune Sachchidananda. And yet the mind in the Ignorance—so long as it is not wholly emancipated—wants some Powers and Personalities of the Divine Mother which it can easily recognize, derive inspiration from and offer sacrifices to: four such Powers and Personalities have been described by Sri Aurobindo in *The Mother*.

1. T. V. Kapali Sastri (*The Indian Express*, Darshan Supplement).
2. *The Mother*, pp. 35-6.

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The main part of *The Mother*—the latter half of the book —that describes the four Shaktis, four of the Mother's leading Powers and Personalities, is perhaps the most inspired piece of writing in the whole body of Sri Aurobindo's prose works. It has been called " *the* mantra of mantras, the mystery of mysteries,—for the seeker of knowledge it is the divine *Gayatri* of *Para Vidya*, for the worker it is the resplendent staircase of truth, for the devotee it is the immortal message of divine love. "[1] So perfectly is the great revelation articulated that it has to be read at a stretch in a mood of imaginative and spiritual concentration ; then only can one apprehend in a single act its vast potencies and splendid modulations. Sri Aurobindo has *seen* the four Shaktis—he has *known* them, he has *been* them ; his rhythms and his words and the resultant music have therefore the chime and the toll and the sweep of a fervent Sanskrit *gadya* like Ramanuja's *Vaicuntha Gadya* or Venkatanatha's *Raghuvira Gadya*.

Sri Aurobindo gives first a summary description of the four Shaktis, to be followed immediately afterwards by a more detailed and an even more evocative and minute description ; but we have here space only to extract the preliminary description and differentiation :

" Four great Aspects of the Mother, four of her leading Powers and Personalities have stood

1. Birendrakishore Roy Choudhury, *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, 1943, p. 229.

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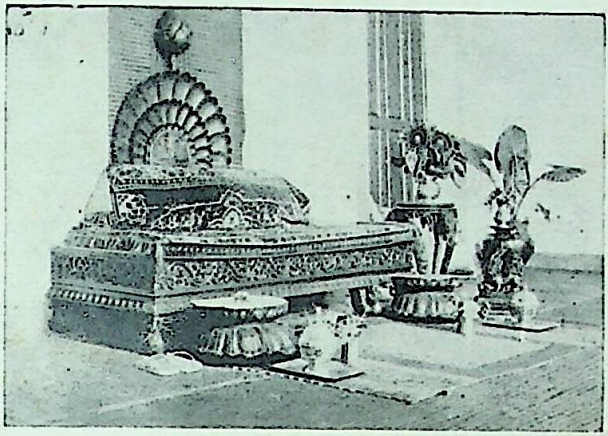

Darshan SIDELIGHTS

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in front in her guidance of this Universe and in her dealings with the terrestrial play. One is her personality of calm wideness and comprehending wisdom and tranquil benignity and inexhaustible compassion and sovereign and surpassing majesty and all-ruling greatness. Another embodies her power of splendid strength and irresistible passion, her warrior mood, her overwhelming will, her impetuous swiftness and world-shaking force. A third is vivid and sweet and wonderful with her deep secret of beauty and harmony and fine rhythm, her intricate and subtle opulence, her compelling attraction and captivating grace. The fourth is equipped with her close and profound capacity of intimate knowledge and careful flawless work and quiet and exact perfection in all things. Wisdom, Strength, Harmony, Perfection are their several attributes and it is these powers that they bring with them into the world, manifest in a human disguise in their Vibhutis and shall found in the divine degree of their ascension in those who can open their earthly nature to the direct and living influence of the Mother. To the four we give the four great names, Maheshwari, Mahakali, Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati."[1]

1 *The Mother*, pp. 48-50. Corresponding with these four Powers and Personalities of the Shakti, there are also four similar Aspects of Ishwara —*viz.*, Mahavira, Balarama, Pradyumna and Aniruddha, typifying the ancient dynamic differentiation between the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Sudra respectively. (*Vide* Nolini Kanta Gupta, "Lines of the Descent of Consciousness," *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, 1943, p. 14).

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One wonders as one reads these twenty-five pages whether one has here a memorable recordation of demonstrable fact or only the subtle elaboration of a poet's fancy; one realizes presently that these portraits in miniature are but faithful prints of the four great Aspects, or suggestive poses, of the supreme Mother, that they are poetically and utterly and quintessentially true portraits of the Mother, that they are truly the visions that one can see if only one learned to exercise one's own soul's sight and sense of apprehension. In any case, judged as English prose, these passages are phosphorescent in their steady luminosity and never did a Sir Thomas Browne or a Walter Savage Landor write anything finer nor even anything half as richly evocative with the rhythms of the spirit.

While the four Aspects of the Divine Shakti are equally the symbols and emanations of Her Power and Her Personality, Maheshwari in particular has "more than any other the heart of the universal Mother"; and her "compassion is endless and inexhaustible."[1] The gift of the Mother's grace can be more easily and naturally invoked from Maheshwari than from Mahakali or even from Mahalakshmi or Mahasaraswati; but Mahakali too is the Mother and in her too love wells up from the unplumbed depths of her Being to spray the devotee with peace and gladness and an immense

1. *The Mother*, pp. 53-4.

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quietude. Maheshwari or Mahakali, Mahalakshmi or Mahasaraswati, She is always the Divine Mother, and She is behind all that is done in the universe, behind all thoughts, all passions, all delights, all actions. If the sadhaka is keen on *siddhi*, if he calls to Her from his psychic depths in a mood of single-hearted self-consecration, Her grace is sure to respond, and the sadhaka is certain to achieve his aim. Hence it is that, not any human endeavour or *tapasya* alone, but it is the Mother's mediation, it is the Mother's grace, that in the final reckoning can " rend the lid and tear the covering and shape the vessel and bring down into this world of obscurity and falsehood and death and suffering Truth and Light and Life divine and the immortal's Ananda."[1]

V

We now pass on to a consideration of one of the potent means by which Sri Aurobindo has maintained his connection with his disciples and, indeed, with the world outside the Yogasram at Pondicherry, —we refer, of course, to the Letters. While Sri Aurobindo has for two or three decades consistently avoided purposeless talks in private or in public, he has nevertheless kept himself in close touch with his disciples—the sadhakas of the

1. *The Mother*, p. 84.

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integral Yoga—with their trials, their hopes, their "dark nights" and their "disturbed nights," their exultations and their exhilarations, their fears and even their "leaden-eyed despairs"; and he has again and again sent them in their extremity the true balm of spiritual succour in the shape of a kindly-worded, conversationally spoken message or letter, an epistle long or short, gay or serious, but always springing from the heart and in every way appropriate to the mood of the correspondent and the nature of the question; it is said that at one time Sri Aurobindo used to sit up half the night, and often whole nights, to answer his correspondents adequately and convincingly; and this went on for weeks and for months and for years! And an important letter sent to a particular disciple generally became soon the common property of all the inmates of the Asram, and all derived spiritual benefit from it, each according to his or her peculiar need and capacity.

There must now be in existence several thousands of these letters; and they all hum and sparkle and whisper, at once a voice near one's ear and a voice from above; they are neither poems, nor rhetorical or ornate pieces of prose, but they reproduce rather the delicate currents of common speech; they are best described as verbal curtains that shut us in—and then we almost decipher the very features and recognize the unique modulations of the voice of the remarkable writer of these

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letters! A letter like the one written recently on the occasion of Hashi's death,[1] or an earlier letter like the one Sri Aurobindo wrote to Dilip on the "logic of his doubts,"[2] being impeccably phrased in rhythms akin to those of subdued but nervous conversational speech, plays upon one's tongue with disarming ease and familiarity. One can picture to oneself this imaginary scene—the *chela* agitatedly putting forward one animadversion after another, the *guru* patiently and almost serenely or smilingly meeting them, explaining, arguing, persuading. Only a casual letter—a "trivial" letter! —but it reveals the writer, explains the core of his faith, and, incidentally, illustrates his prose art.

Many of the letters that deal mainly with Yoga —either the underlying principles of the Yoga or intimate personal problems like those relating to food, desire, sex, illness, sleep, calm, peace, etc.— have now been edited and published in book form. *The Riddle of this World*, *Lights on Yoga* and *Bases of Yoga*—stimulating books all of them, containing some of the finest prose in all the Sri Aurobindo canon—are all the fruits of the Asram period and there is very little doubt that a lot more remains to be published. But this much is certain: Sri Aurobindo's words, seemingly impersonal and austerely

1. Quoted in Dilip's *Aurobindo Prasanghe*, pp. 108-113.
2. Quoted in Dilip's *Tirthankar*, pp. 365-7.

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expressed in classical English prose, come to us always with the friendliness of a private conversation.

It must not be supposed that Sri Aurobindo's letters as a rule deal only with "difficult" themes like philosophy and Yoga. Sri Aurobindo's is a philosophy of life and hence embraces *all* life; his Yoga, again, is the "integral" Yoga and accordingly tries to exert a chastening and purifying influence on *all* human activities. Thus a casual reader of Sri Aurobindo's letters or of the Mother's "Conversations" (which owed their origin to the Mother's talks with her disciples) will be struck by their direct and perennially human appeal to us. Further, simply as a matter of fact, Sri Aurobindo's letters are not always confined to a discussion of knotty points in his philosophy and Yoga like the "graded worlds" and the "intermediate zone." There are also letters on a variety of other subjects —and especially are there a very large number of letters on poetry, on comparative criticism, and on several individual poets. A disciple would send some question or other for answer, some poem or prose extract for explanation and comment, and Sri Aurobindo would be "provoked" to giving a beautifully phrased reply, redolent of wisdom and learning and humour. And so the questions rush into the *sanctum sanctorum* and return the next morning or the same evening with their epistolary treasure, to feed and gladden and enrapture their devotees.

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What a diversity of themes and what a variety of approach ! The twelve great masters of prose style in the world ; Æschylus and Dante ; Dante and Shakespeare ; Shakespeare and Blake ; the poetry of the school of Pope and Dryden ; Shelley's *Skylark* ; Planck and the Quantum Theory ; Ouspensky ; automatic writing ; Baudelaire's " vulgarity" ; Anatole France's ironising ; spiritism, ghosts, popular superstitions ; Cheiro and Astrology ; de la Mare's *Listeners* ; austerity in poetry ; architectonics in poetic composition ; the character of Rama ; limits of personal vagaries in criticism ; relation between length of poems and purity of poetic expression ; the unescapable subjective element in all criticism of poetry ; the quantitative metre in English ; on translating poetry ; the place of Bernard Shaw in English literature ; the Overmind inspiration in poetry ; Yoga and the fine arts ; the poetry of Shahid Suhrawardy, of Amalkiran (K. D. Sethna), of Dilip, of Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, of Bharati Sarabhai, of Armando Menezes ; the vagaries of modern English poetry ; the poetry of D. H. Lawrence ; the poetry of Arjava (J. A. Chadwick) . . . . indeed, there is no end !

There is not space here to give excerpts from Sri Aurobindo's letters in order adequately to indicate their richness, their scintillating wit, their unobtrusive humour, their unexpected turns of phrase, their Americanisms and colloquialisms which come just at the appropriate places, their

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memorable flashes, their tone of gentle familiarity, and, above all, their effectual revelation of a great and unique personality whose capacity for multiple concentration could alone have enabled him to write so often, to so many correspondents, on such a variety of themes, and always with confidence, pellucid clarity, and a self-evident finality. Here are a few lines, as it were carelessly dashed off, and yet they succeed in differentiating between Goethe and Shakespeare with force and finality:

"Yes, Goethe goes much deeper than Shakespeare; he had an incomparably greater intellect than the English poet and sounded problems of life and thought Shakespeare had no means of approaching even. But he was certainly not a greater poet; I cannot either admit that he was an equal. He wrote out of his intelligence, and his style and movement nowhere came near the poetic power, the magic, the sovereign expression and profound or subtle rhythms of Shakespeare. Shakespeare was a supreme poet and one might almost say, nothing else; Goethe was by far the greater man and the greater brain, but he was a poet by choice rather than by the very necessity of his being. He wrote his poetry as he did everything else with a great skill and effective genius, but it was only part of his genius and not the whole. And there is a touch wanting—the touch of an absolute poetic inevitability; this lack leaves his poetry on a lower

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level than that of the few quite supreme poets."[1] Not less profound nor less satisfactory and final is the distinction that Sri Aurobindo draws, in the course of the same letter, between Vyasa and Valmiki on the one hand and Homer and Shakespeare on the other.

In many of the letters current affairs also are glanced at and occasionally commented upon. Sri Aurobindo has certainly little in common with the popular conception of a Yogi; he rather surprises one with his uncanny knowledge of the minutiæ as also of the broad outlines of current affairs. Quotation is again difficult, but the following brief note well illustrates Sri Aurobindo's awareness of the contemporary world scene no less than his wisdom and his disarming humour:

> "Seized with lunacy? But this implies that the nation is ordinarily led by reason. Is it so? Or even by common sense? Masses of men act upon their vital push, not according to reason: individuals too do the same. If they call in their reason, it is as a lawyer to plead the vital's cause."[2]

In another letter he discusses the importance of humour: "Sense of humour? It is the salt of existence. Without it the world would have got utterly out of balance—it is unbalanced enough

1. Quoted in Dilip's *Anami*, p. 252.
2. Quoted in Dilip's *Suryamukhi*, p. 411.

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already—and rushed to blazes long ago."

Sri Aurobindo has also been closely watching the present world conflagration which assumes in his eyes the colour of a cosmic conflict between the Divine and Asuric forces in the world. He has boldly and openly supported the cause of the United Nations, and he has called the war really the Mother's war. In a letter written to a disciple on the 29th July 1942, Sri Aurobindo said in unfaltering accents :

> "It is a struggle for an ideal that has to establish itself on earth in the life of humanity, for a Truth that has yet to realize itself fully and against a darkness and falsehood that are trying to overwhelm the earth and mankind in the immediate future....It is a struggle for the liberty of mankind to develop, for conditions in which men have freedom and room to think and act according to the Light in them and grow in the Truth, grow in the Spirit. There cannot be the slightest doubt that if one side wins there will be an end of all such freedom and hope of light and truth and the work that has to be done will be subjected to conditions which would make it humanly impossible ; there will be a reign of falsehood and darkness, a cruel oppression and degradation for most of the human race such as people in this country do not dream of and cannot yet at all realize. If the other side that has declared itself for the free future of humanity

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triumphs, this terrible danger will have been averted and conditions will have been created in which there will be a chance for the ideal to grow, for the Divine Work to be done, for the spiritual truth for which we stand to establish itself on the earth. Those who fight for this cause are fighting for the Divine and against the threatened reign of the Asura."[1]

It is also a well-known fact that at the time of the Cripps negotiations, Sri Aurobindo, alone among the leading personalities in India, openly advocated an immediate acceptance of the "proposals." Had India hearkened to his advice then, she might have been spared all this Atlas-weight of frustration, this creeping paralysis that seems to have penetrated the very core of our national life[2]; but that was not to be!

Secluded and silent and calm he may be; but his pulses respond every second to the multitudinous affairs of "dear and dogged" humanity. Along with the Mother, he is the spiritual director of the Asram—of the three hundred and fifty permanent sadhakas who constitute its complex and harmonious life. His very presence—albeit for the most part invisible—itself exerts an enormous, an incommensurable influence on the inner and outer life of the sadhakas. The earnestness and the sincerity, the wisdom and

1. Quoted in Nolini Kanta Gupta's pamphlet, *The World War: Its Inner Bearing* (1942).
2. Written in November 1943.

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the humour—above all, the admixture of the divine and the human—in the letters to the sadhakas captivate them, carry them along (as the baby cat is carried by its mother), and none complains—complains, that is, really seriously. Sri Aurobindo sometimes makes admonition itself a honeyed sweetness as in this letter : " You have the reputation of being a fierce and firebrand doctor who considers it a crime for patients to have illness. You may be right, but tradition demands that a doctor should be soft like butter, soothing like treacle, sweet like sugar and jolly like jam. So ! "[1] And, although he is but occupying a corner of the Asram premises, unseen and unheard, unnoticed and unphotographed and unadvertized, he is nevertheless in the thick of the fight—in the thick of the cosmic struggle going on in the Pacific and on the Burman border and in the vast regions of Russia and in the approaches to Rome and in the Atlantic between the Continents—and he will not spare himself, no, not for an instant ; and he is but telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth when he says : " My life has been a battle from its early years and is still a battle ; the fact that I wage it now from a room upstairs and by spiritual means as well as others that are external makes no difference to its character. "[2]

1. Letter to Nirod.
2. Letter to a disciple (1935).

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VI

The Yogasram at Pondicherry that has grown around Sri Aurobindo during the past two decades is a hallowed area and a unique spiritual laboratory. The Asram has often been the victim of misapprehension and misinterpretation; but he who runs can see what the Asram is and what it stands for. It is not a public body—religious, social, educational, or political—with its written constitution, its bye-laws, its slumbering sub-committees, its democratic cross-currents, its general inefficiency; the Asram is "just the house or houses of a Teacher or Master of spiritual philosophy in which he receives those who come to him for the teaching and practice.....Such Asrams have existed in India since many centuries before Christ and still exist in large numbers. All depends on the Teacher and ends with his lifetime, unless there is another Teacher who can take his place."[1]

While it is true that Sri Aurobindo Asram shares with all genuine Asrams past and present its spiritual character, it is not exactly the kind of Asram we commonly visualize—an inaccessible nook somewhere in Dandakaranya or the Himalayas where a set of *sadhus* do *tapasya* to be able to get for ever beyond the endless chain of birth and death and birth again. On the other hand, the Yogasram at Pondicherry is—to use the word in no derogatory

1. *The Teaching and the Asram of Sri Aurobindo*, pp. 1-2.

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sense—a *modern* Asram. It is located (or shall we say —it has located itself ?) near the seashore in much the cleanest part of Pondicherry. It now consists of a number of buildings scattered over a wide enough area. In the main Asram building live Sri Aurobindo, the Mother, and some of the veteran sadhakas ; the Library (a good one and a growing one), the Reading Room, the Asram bank, the Meditation Hall and court-yard, are also in the main Asram building or compound. In the other important buildings are housed the Dining Hall, the dairy, the bakery, the laundry, the engineering workshop, the granary, the bindery, the dispensary, the Asram schools, all being under the management of the sadhakas. The Mother supervises every little item of the organization of the Asram and all the sadhakas work as her instruments, the work being invariably offered as a sacrifice to the Divine Mother and the Supreme.

Whether one loiters among the trees and flowers of the Asram, or sits by oneself in the cool and restful hours of the evening, or attends Anilbaran's, Rishabhchand's or Dixit's instructive readings from and expositions of *The Life Divine*, or visits Dilip House to catch the strains of melodious music, or exchanges suggestive words with a Nolini, an Amrita, a Purani, a Prithwisingh, a Premanand, or even if one merely watches the sadhakas at work—it may be only a matter of rolling up or unrolling the mats, or collecting and sorting out the flowers, or washing

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and piling up the plates and cups and spoons, or even no more than doing " gate duty "—and ever and always one is sure to repeat the words of Horace : *Atque inter silvas Academi quærere verum* (" And seek for truth in the garden of Academus ").[1] We may, however, modify the exhortation thus : " And seek for truth in the Asram at Pondicherry " !

It is a fair description of the Yogasram at Pondicherry to call it the first, obscure, faltering, none-theless highly promising, preliminary sketch of " a new Heaven and a new Earth. " Sri Aurobindo himself nowadays hardly ever sees people and corresponds but rarely even with his disciples. But he gives *darshan* four times a year and blesses his disciples and the permitted visitors to the Asram. The *darshan*[2] days are festive occasions in the life of the Asram ; people from all over India meet in the Asram and obtain *darshan* of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. For the rest, the sadhakas can read his published works or unpublished correspondence, chant his unique recent experiments in " futurist " poetry, or read the Mother's *Conversations* or *Prayers and Meditations*, and otherwise summon whatever inspiration they can from their mere proximity to the Master and the Mother. As a rule, Sri Aurobindo's influence seems to be deeply felt in the Asram and all—one may say, even inanimate things—are apparently moulded by this subtle

1. *Epistles*, II, ii, l. 45.

2. Vide the present writer's " *Darshan* of Sri Aurobindo " (*Human Affairs*, November 1943).

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and powerful influence; likewise, the Mother's living presence and influence is also purposive, distinct and potent, and she is verily adored by the sadhakas "as the very Incarnation of the supreme Shakti."[1]

The claim can also be made that some of the principles outlined in books like *The Psychology of Social Development* and *The Ideal of Human Unity* are being actually put into practice—though only on the scale of a miniature—in the constitution and daily life of the Yogasram. The three hundred and fifty inmates of the Asram are drawn from different parts of India, with a noticeable sprinkling of Europeans and Americans as well; there are young and old people, there are men, women, and children. There are poets, musicians, artists, retired civilians, ex-professors, physicians and surgeons, engineers, *sadhus*, ex-lawyers; all, high and low,—there is really neither high nor low in the Asram scale—engage themselves in some fruitful action or another according to the Mother's direction; and "the Mother deals with each person differently according to his true need (not what he himself fancies to be his need) and his progress in the *sadhana* and his nature."[2] The constitution of the Asram thus replaces the ideal of alms-begging by purposive work, work offered as a sacrifice to the Mother,

1. Sisirkumar Mitra, *Sri Aurobindo: A Homage*, p. 27.
2. Sri Aurobindo, Letter to a disciple (1930).

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work dedicated to the Divine ; and at the same time, it delivers the sadhakas from all unlovely preoccupations with money and the problem of bread-winning and the concomitant degradations and difficulties. All the sadhakas are one in the Mother ; all meditate in the presence of the Mother ; all put their *adhara* in its entirety at the disposal of the Mother ; and in the eyes of the sadhakas, all work ranks the same, all is the Mother's work, all is done as a perpetual reaffirmation of the *sankalpa* of *atmasamarpana*.

The stray responsive visitor to the Yogasram at Pondicherry is sure to sniff at once the "atmosphere" of the place—its feeling for rhythm and its sense of harmony, its mellowed lights and its whispered sweetnesses, its enveloping peace and its soul-elevating piety. The complicated wheels of the Asram—as complicated as are the processes and concerns of Nature—nevertheless revolve unseen, almost as effortlessly and unconsciously as they do in the seething world of Nature. The Asram is but the rough sketch of the Promised Land,—just a few dots and dashes and shapely curves,—but even then one can discover in them the vague configurations, the confident commencement, of "a new Heaven and a new Earth." The Yogasram is the dynamic phase of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga and is as yet only a crisp and charming promissory note ; but—and this makes all the difference—the seal and the signature are Sri Aurobindo's !

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EPILOGUE

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A HOMAGE

I

Ever since Sri Aurobindo's departure from Calcutta in 1910, attempts have been made from time to time to bring him back to active political life. His friends, his former colleagues, the managers of one forward political party or another, all have in different ways tried to persuade Sri Aurobindo to re-enter the political arena and lead the country. Once the great Lala Lajpat Rai himself paid a visit to Pondicherry and tried to break the prolonged spell of Sri Aurobindo's retirement : in vain ! The lure of the presidentship of the Indian National Congress has itself proved powerless to make Sri Aurobindo change his mind. He would not come out of his seclusion even to preside over the Ramakrishna centenary celebrations !

When the late Deshabandhu Chittaranjan Das, himself then at the heyday of his political pre-eminence, requested Sri Aurobindo to re-enter politics, he received a very characteristic reply :

> " I think you know my present idea and the attitude towards life and work to which it has brought me. I see more and more manifestly

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that man can never get out of the futile circle the race is always treading, until he has raised himself on to a new foundation. I have become confirmed in a perception which I had, always, less clearly and dynamically then, but which has now become more and more evident to me, that the true basis of work and life is the spiritual: that is to say, a new consciousness to be developed only by Yoga. But what precisely was the nature of the dynamic power of this greater consciousness? What was the condition of its effective truth? How could it be brought down, mobilized, organized, turned upon life? How could our present instruments—intellect, mind, life, body—be made true and perfect channels for this great transformation? This was the problem I have been trying to work out in my own experience and I have now a sure basis, a wide knowledge and some mastery of the secret.....I have still to remain in retirement. For I am determined not to work in the external field till I have the sure and complete possession of this new power of action—not to build except on a perfect foundation."[1]

Likewise, when a further attempt was made, soon after Chittaranjan's death, to persuade Sri Aurobindo to return from his cell and fill the vacant place of political leadership in Bengal and all-India,

1. Quoted in Dilip's *Tirthankar*, p. 354.

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Sri Aurobindo unhesitatingly decided to remain in Pondicherry. And he has so far chosen to remain in retirement in his own secluded rooms in the Yogasram.

And yet Sri Aurobindo's letter to Chittaranjan raises one or two questions. At the time of writing the letter, in other words about twenty years ago, Sri Aurobindo was still on his spiritual quest. He had no doubt achieved a measure of realization already and was privileged therefore to rest in one of the inns of tranquillity on the way to the final goal. But the battle was not over by any means; he had yet to effect the final great transformation of our earth nature into supernature; the rending of the veil which separates us from the Real-Idea, the supramental consciousness, must have become an accomplished fact; for he had already written with knowledge and authority about the supermind but complete possession of the goal had not then been reached. "I am determined not to work in the external field till.....": has he still not obtained sure and complete possession of this "new power of action"? If he has,—what next? We cannot answer these questions..... only Sri Aurobindo can, and he will answer them some time, in his own way; perhaps, indeed, the answer is contained in the following letter that he wrote to a disciple:

"I may say also that I did not leave politics because I felt I could do nothing more there;

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such an idea was very far from me. I came away because I got a very distinct *adesh* in the matter. I have cut connection entirely with politics."

In any case, such speculations on our part would be merely puerile and would not lead anywhere.

II

But one thing is clear : boy, or adolescent youth, or teacher of literature, or lover of fair Bengal, or knight-errant of Indian nationalism, or servant of humanity, or torch-bearer of the Divine,— Sri Aurobindo has travelled far afield indeed, but only along the same road and always towards the same goal. He has always been inclined to ask : What do they know of love and service who only themselves love and serve ? The centre of gravity that motivates action should be shifted further and further away from oneself, achieving fresher and wider integrations all the time : love not yourself, love Bengal ; serve not yourself, serve the Mother and her seventy million souls ! Presently the tune changed, it became deep, it became insistent, it echoed and re-echoed in his ear : love not yourself, love India ; serve her, help her to regain her former glory. Once more the tune changed, but it continued to be as terribly alluring as ever : love only Sanatana Dharma, serve her loyally, and help her to re-establish herself. Yet once more the *raga*—

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as in a *ragamalika*—flowed into another and the dulcet notes insinuated another exhortation into his ear: love humanity, serve humanity, give it a helping hand as it strives, in however purblind a fashion, to divinize itself! This was the reason why Sri Aurobindo declared, in 1921, that the integral Yoga "is not for ourselves alone, but for humanity."[1]

One further integration, too, was possible, and it occurred in the fullness of time: no, no, Sri Aurobindo said, Yoga is not for the sake of humanity, —it is, first and last and all the time, only for the sake of the Divine. As the Mother has categorically declared:

> "It is not the welfare of humanity that we seek but the manifestation of the Divine. We are here to work out the Divine Will, more truly, to be worked upon by the Divine Will, so that we may be its instruments for the progressive incorporation of the Supreme and the establishment of His reign upon the earth."[2]

Sri Aurobindo, then, has always been forging ahead, his horizons have ever been widening, the field of his spiritual action has ever been broadening and extending. He has now reached the culmination of his labours and achieved what M. Jacques Maritain would call a "universal integration";

1. *The Yoga and its Objects*, p. 5.
2. *Words of the Mother*, pp. 39-40.

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he has arrived at a total world view that comprehends and transcends all his earlier, incomplete views. After a lifetime of ceaseless yearnings and assiduous climbings on the steep stair of spirituality, Sri Aurobindo has at last been favoured, it would seem, with the beatific vision of Sachchidananda on the very Pisgah heights of his own inveterate striving. He has caught indeed a vision, a vision of the Eternal, a vision of triune glory, a vision in the furthest beyond of transformed Supernature ; but the vision is not, on its highest peaks, a concrete embodied reality as yet ; something has come down of the power or the influence, but not the thing itself, far less its whole.

III

At the present juncture in human history especially, the outlook is on the face of it dim and uncertain and most depressing. We seem to be threatened with the sure crash of most human values. Sensitive men and women cannot now help pathetically looking before and after and pining for what is not. Now more than ever do we want a Teacher —a Messiah—who could give us Faith, who could give us a Revelation, who could show us the straight road to the Ramarajya, the Satyayuga, the Golden Age, the new Heaven and the new Earth of our fervent imaginations. And Sri Aurobindo—the Prophet of Supernature and the Pilgrim of Eternity—is the great Power and Personality that the Time

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Spirit has evolved out of the labour of the ages !

He is a Power, he is a Personality ; but his Power and his Personality alike refuse to be cribbed within the confines of material categories. 'Power' and 'Personality' are elusive terms, even when we are considering them only in relation to average specimens of humanity ; but what can we possibly know— or hope to know—about the Power and the Personality of a truly unique spiritual phenomenon like Sri Aurobindo ? His real "inner" life has always remained a closed book to us ; we have only been able to notice and describe some of the "accretions." This great Maharshi's yogic strength, as we have striven to show in the preceding pages, has manifested itself, now in one way or direction, now in another, always exemplifying the Lord's assurance that Yoga is veritably "skill in works"—*yogah karmasu kowshalam* ! And thus we have been privileged to establish a measure of intimacy, however imperfect, with Sri Aurobindo's many powers and personalities—the dreamer, the idealist, the poet ; the scholar, the critic, the teacher ; the tireless publicist, the intrepid speaker, the flaming apostle of resurgent nationalism ; the philosopher, the poet of Yoga, the architect of a new Heaven and a new Earth !

The picture we have tried to present in our pages is no doubt much less than the whole truth, for Sri Aurobindo, while he has been and is all the varied parts he has played and is playing in the drama of

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Life, while he is a Man among men and a leader of mankind, is also more than man, he tantalizingly includes and exceeds, transcends and transforms the poet and the politician, the prophet and the pilgrim.

No; Sri Aurobindo's Power and Personality cannot be evaluated; we can but beg the question and call him a Yogi, a Rishi, —he is, indeed, many Rishis in one, a *purna* Rishi! He at any rate is not reduced to a feeling of inutility by the prevalent crisis in human history: on the contrary, he is able to look forward with unhurried self-confidence to the day when the great transformation will in fact take place, when harmony will reign in the place of the prevalent discords, when the chaos of the hour will resolve itself into the dancing star of the Divine's utter fashioning, when the Asuric forces that now rage around us in a Dance of Death will all have been finally liquidated, when Man will master his fate at last and wake into the baptism of a divine rebirth.

The mere fact of Sri Aurobindo's presence amongst us—for he is with us perpetually though we do not see him—is a promise of liberation to ailing humanity. And Sri Aurobindo, the Prince of Givers, gives us the blest assurance that the felicity that is his *shall* be ours as well! The hour is not far off when corruption will put on incorruption and desire will grow desireless and incapacity will shed its weakness and grow into the puissance of Conscious-Force and immitigable death will lose

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its present sting and grow into immortality. Sri Aurobindo is the "mighty Prophet" and "seer blest" who has taught us this *mantra* of our imminent liberation. We shall therefore conclude by offering our "homage" to the Master in these words of Stephen Langton :

Veni Sancte Spiritus
Et emitte cœlitus
Lucis tuae radium.

Come, O Creator Spirit, come,
And make within our hearts thy home ;
To us thy grace celestial give,
Who of thy breathing move and live.[1]

1. *Sequence in Mass of Pentecost.* The English rendering is by the late Robert Bridges.

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APPENDIX

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A NOTE ON "THOUGHT THE PARACLETE"[1]

I.—Introduction.

A short poem of but twenty-two lines, *Thought the Paraclete* is nevertheless among the most characteristic of Sri Aurobindo's poetic utterances. Along with five other equally typical pieces, it appeared about two years ago; but the poems were apparently composed many years earlier. They are now reprinted in the second volume of Sri Aurobindo's *Collected Poems and Plays* and appear in the section entitled "Transformation and Other Poems."

Thought the Paraclete is a sudden, swift jet of piercing, unconventional melody. One reads and re-reads it, astonished and awed into a rapture; one is puzzled by its currents of thought and play of imagery; one is dazzled and thrilled by its radiation of light and riot of colour; one is chastened at last into an ineffable quietude by its sheer art, its suggestion of both lightning motion and an unearthly peace. There is no doubt at all that the poem embodies a vast and potent revelation!

And yet *Thought the Paraclete* puzzles and intrigues the reader, for, while catching its general drift at once, he is none-the-less all but floored by its imagery and its colour symbolism. The poem is clearly the expression of an experienced ascent of Thought—Thought that, like a shooting star, spans a vast zone in a blinding fraction of time. But although we can intellectually strive to reproduce the experience in our own minds, it will be but a lifeless façade,

1. First published in *The Advent*, Vol. I, No. 1 (Feb. 1944).

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a grandiose proxy bloated with mere mental stuff. The experience as such is unfortunately denied to most of us, and hence we pathetically blink in our bewilderment when the poet describes the thrills he has braved, the splendours he has glimpsed, the beatitudes he has been.

It is not suggested here—far from it!—that spiritual experiences should not constitute the subject-matter of poetry. A poet can coin his unique spiritual adventures into imperishable poetry even as he can deftly turn his emotional responses into an elegy or a song or an ode. But spiritual experiences being *per se* ineffable are for that very reason incommunicable through the medium of our everyday vocabulary. And yet spiritual experiences are dear to the heart of man, and he would gladly clutch at the intangible, and capture and retain it (if he could!) as a part of himself. That is why we cherish in our heart's tabernacle revelations like Francis Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven* and Sri Aurobindo's *Trance of Waiting* and *Thought the Paraclete*. We love them, we cherish them, we tap them from time to time to draw forth momentary solace, but—do we *understand* them in every particular, do we gauge the plenty in every crevice or sense the significance of every turn of thought and every shade of colour? Let us frankly admit that we do not and that, perhaps, we cannot; at any rate, it is very consoling to be told by Coleridge that poetry should only be generally, and not too perfectly, understood. Even so, let us take courage in both hands and draw closer to *Thought the Paraclete;* and let us venture to scrutinize it with reverent care.

II.—Form and Metre.

Thought the Paraclete is one of several fruitful attempts on Sri Aurobindo's part to give classical quantitative metres agreeable English habitations and forms. In his long,

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scholarly and illuminating essay on Quantitative Metre, Sri Aurobindo has generally indicated the broad lines along which the oft-attempted and oft-frustrated endeavour may indeed be carried to a successful conclusion; and most of his recent poems—quite apart from their thought-content or spiritual impulsion—are offered as luminous exhibits that amply illustrate and to a very considerable extent justify his prosodical theories.

In *Thought the Paraclete* Sri Aurobindo attempts an interesting variation of the Latin phaleuciackes or hendecasyllabics of Catullus. The metrical scheme of the hendecasyllabic line is given by this notation:

– – | – ⏑ ⏑ | – ⏑ | – ⏑ | – ⏑ | ;

in other words, a spondee starts the line and is followed first by a dactyl and then by three trochees. Sidney, Coleridge, Tennyson and Swinburne are among the famous English poets who have attempted, either half-heartedly or in a mood of frivolity, to write English hendecasyllabics. Sidney follows the orthodox scheme in lines like:

Reason, | tell me thy | Mynde, yf | here bee | Reason?
In this | straunge vyo|lence to | make re|sistence,
Where sweete | Graces e|rect the | stately | Banner?

But Sidney is obviously ill at ease,—for instance, "reason" is a spondee at the beginning, but a trochee at the end!

Coleridge's *Catullan Hendecasyllabics*, on the other hand, refuse to scan in the orthodox (or, indeed, in any) fashion. He generally manages to retain the three trochees at the end, but the earlier half of the line is made up usually of two trisyllabic feet, though, once in a way, he does not scruple to begin with a foot even of four syllables:

Shivering with | ecstasy | sank upon her | bosom.

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a grandiose proxy bloated with mere mental stuff. The experience as such is unfortunately denied to most of us, and hence we pathetically blink in our bewilderment when the poet describes the thrills he has braved, the splendours he has glimpsed, the beatitudes he has been.

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Tennyson is much more orthodox, but then his *Hendecasyllabics* are meant only to produce a comic effect, as in:

Hard, hard, | hard is it, | only | not to | tumble,
So fantastical is the dainty metre.
Wherefore slight me not wholly, nor believe me
Too presumptuous, indolent reviewers.

Swinburne's *Hendecasyllabics*, on the other hand, follow merely a trochaic rhythm, with an invariable dactylic substitution for the second foot:

In the | month of the | long de|cline of | roses
I, be|holding the | summer | dead be|fore me;

and the result is—and this is only too common in Swinburne—a more or less "ineffugable" monotony.

Sri Aurobindo's hendecasyllabics are, however, hendecasyllabics with a difference. He saw clearly that "classical metres cannot always with success be taken over just as they are into the English rhythm; often some modifications are needed to make them more malleable."[1] He accordingly begins as a rule with a trochee; the spondee and the dactyl follow, and are themselves followed by two trochees; and—this is most significant—"the last syllable of the closing trochee is most often dropped altogether."[2] The first two lines of *Thought the Paraclete*, scanned according to this scheme, will read as follows:

As some | bright arch|angel in | vision | flies
Plunged in | dream-caught | spirit im|mensi|ties.....

The modifications no doubt result in reducing the hendecasyllabic to a decasyllabic line,—but there are also counter-

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 305.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 305.

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balancing advantages. The pushing of the dactyl towards the centre gives the line an arching, almost a parabolic movement, immediately suggesting the "ascent" implied in the poem. The weight and volume of sound in the first three feet naturally resolve themselves into a crescendo, a graded ascending scale in tone and pitch. But "ascent" ever involves "descent" as well, and hence the latter half of the line is so contrived by Sri Aurobindo that it shapes itself into a diminuendo and thereby insinuates into our ear this crucial principle underlying his metaphysics.

The elimination of the last syllable of the closing trochee is also important from another point of view. *Thought the Paraclete* is both a structure of thought and a stream of sound; the former consists of spans of thought (or sentences), while the latter is made up of a large number of feet of sound. The shortest of the spans of thought is concreted into the last line of the poem; so too the shortest of the feet of sound is compressed into the clear and hard mould of the monosyllabic fifth foot. And yet the last foot signifies no weakness, no poverty of sound; it is a single, but long, syllable; even exceptions like "being" and "seeing" are but apparently so; the final close of each line thus repeatedly strikes a note of self-sufficiency and strength; it is, as it were, "throned in the luminous vast of illimitable self-vision."[1]

We have now only to write down the notation,

– ⏑ | – – | – ⏑ ⏑ | – ⏑ | – ;

read it from right to left and anon from left to right, and we can at once perceive that the metre is truly symbolic of the thought-content of the poem, that it visibly indicates the principle of evolution-involution or ascent-descent that is at the core of Sri Aurobindo's metaphysics of the Life

1. *The Life Divine*, I, p. 183.

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Divine. It is said that a single *anustup* vivifies in itself the *karuna rasa* that *Valmiki Ramayana* so wonderfully evokes in its mighty sweeps and memorable incantations. We may similarly hazard the statement that each of Sri Aurobindo's hendecasyllabics is also a phonetic galvanization of the idea of the ascent of consciousness towards the Supermind and of the descent of the Spirit that at last brings about this great transformation :

Self was left, lone, limitless, nude, immune.

A word may be added about the rhyme-scheme of *Thought the Paraclete*. The twenty-two lines are divided into eleven pairs of rhymes, and the arrangement is as follows :

aa ; bcdcdebe ; fgfg ; hiijjh ; kk ;

it is as though a rising movement intersects again and again a falling movement, as if the two movements are involved in a prolonged and purposeful embrace. The curious may group the rhymes into four couplets and two quatrains, the remaining rhymes floating in between somewhat elusively ; as a matter of fact, excepting for the initial and concluding couplets, the rest of the rhymes agreeably play a sort of hide-and-seek, and the whole poem thus produces in the responsive ear the impression rather of a " winding bout of linked sweetness long drawn out. "

We have tried to show here that the form and metre of *Thought the Paraclete* merit and repay a careful study and analysis. As one slowly reads the poem,—as one familiarizes oneself with its half-exotic, but highly seductive and chastening, rhythms,—as one gazes enraptured at its rounded completeness, one realizes at length that Sri Aurobindo has somehow nobly succeeded in giving the hendecasyllabic an English soul and setting. He has succeeded, it would seem, where a Sidney, a Coleridge and a Swinburne had failed ; and he has succeeded only because he has all along known, not

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only the possibilities, but also the peculiar limitations of an attempt to reproduce classical metres in English.

III.—The Title of the Poem.

So much about the form and the metre : we shall now turn to the *title* of the poem—"Thought the Paraclete"! We know—do we really, or do we only think we know?—what "thought" is ; we fondly believe sometimes that a certain thought is illuminating, that it germinated in the obscure depths of our consciousness on a particular occasion, even that it is "developing," sprouting forth in many directions. But why does Sri Aurobindo call Thought the Paraclete? What exactly is a Paraclete? And why is Thought *the* Paraclete?

The word "Paraclete" occurs in the *New Testament*,[1] where Christ refers to the Holy Ghost as the Paraclete Mr. C. H. Irwin explains the term thus :

> "It includes the idea of *Comforter* and ....*Advocate*. Each of these words must be taken in its fullest sense, so as to include instruction, guidance, strength, and holy elevation of desire and purpose. The word clearly implies the *personality* of the Holy Spirit."[2]

The Jesuit mystic and poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, attempts in one of his sermons a more vivid explanation of the term :

> "A Paraclete is one who comforts, who cheers, who encourages, who persuades, who exhorts, who stirs up, who urges forward, who calls on ; what the spur and word of command is to a horse, what clapping of hands is to a speaker, what a trumpet is to the soldier, that a Paraclete is to the soul ; *one who calls us on*, that is what it means, a

1. *John*, XIV, 16, 26 : XV, 26 ; XVI, 7.
2. *The Universal Bible Commentary*, p. 433.

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> Paraclete is one who calls us on to do good. One sight is before my mind, it is homely but it comes home : you have seen at cricket how, when one of the batsmen at the wicket has made a hit and wants to score a run, the other doubts, hangs back, or is ready to run in again, how eagerly the first will cry—Come on, come on !—a Paraclete is just that something that cheers the spirit of man, with signals and with cries, all zealous that he should do something and full of assurance that if he will he can, calling him on, springing to meet him half way, crying to his ears or to his heart : This way to do God's will, this way to save your soul, come on, come on. "[1]

And Hopkins has also tried to show that, although Christ is certainly a Paraclete, only the Holy Ghost is *the* Paraclete.

However, the term " Paraclete " seems to have occasionally been used in other illuminating contexts also. Thus the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives two extracts, one of which refers to the " victorious hero " as the " true Paraclete, " while the other credits Plato with using " in one place the term Paraclete, Intercessor, in speaking of the Reason. " If Reason can be called the Paraclete, why, so too, can Thought be,—Thought that ever strives to reach up to the meanings of things, ever bravely scales the spiral of Consciousness, ever attempts to achieve a total and intimate compenetration with ultimate Reality !

Thought, then, is a Paraclete, even *the* Paraclete. As Sri Aurobindo points out, Thought " is not the giver of knowledge but the ' mediator ' between the Inconscient and the Superconscient. It compels the world born from the Inconscient to reach for knowledge other than the instinctively vital or merely empirical ; it calls for that Superconscient knowledge and prepares the consciousness here to receive it. It raises

1. *The Note-Books and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p. 287.

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itself into the higher realms, and even in disappearing into the supramental and Ananda levels is transformed into something that will bring down their powers into the silent Self which its cessation leaves behind it."[1] It is this conception of Thought that is embodied in the term "the Paraclete", and the poem itself may be aptly described as a radiant evocation of the successive stages by which the Paraclete, the celestial automobile, registers its progress and brings the clinging occupant to the long-sought sanctuary of Bliss.

Thought, then, is our mediator, our intercessor; we summon it to our aid whenever we tread upon the multitudinous thorns of life; we repose no mean trust in Thought, for we know it can "gently lead us on"; it willingly takes our half-articulate messages to the world of the Superconscience and it also brings to us "airs from heaven" to comfort us, or to sting us to further spurts of ascent—onward and onward—to the very gate of the enthroned seat of the Supermind, and even beyond to the ineffable Bliss of Brahman. Dare man gaze at the Sun and his supernal splendours and remain unblinded yet? Dare man leap across the shoreless chasm that divides the worlds of Inconscience and Superconscience, the mental world of division and pain and multiplicity and the other-world of harmony and Ananda and integral unity?

But—astonishing as it may appear—Man dares all and often stakes all because Thought the Paraclete is his guide and his intercessor, Thought is the angel the breath of whose nostrils softens even the heat of the journey, the strength of whose wings —"great glimmering wings of wind"—bridges the distance between the *here* and the *there*, indeed even brings the here and the there together and transforms them into an infinite here and an eternal now.

1. In the course of a letter to a disciple.

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However, the stages on the " journey " are to be visualized, not on a space-time basis in terms of a left-to-right or a bottom-to-top progression from one junction or aerodrome of achievement to another and a further and a better, but rather psychologically as movements in consciousness, as successive attempts at a dynamic comprehension of the One in the Many and the Many in the One, as progressive attempts to reduce more and more, and finally to eliminate altogether, the " immense hiatus as seems to exist between Supramental Truth-Consciousness and the Mind in the Ignorance."[1] Man may be in appearance a thing of nought, a muling and a puking creature that is the jest of Nature, subject alas ! to the giant evils of death, desire and incapacity ; but man refuses to grovel in the groove of his limitations, refuses to gloat over these badges of his misery, but is resolved rather to exceed himself, to possess the Infinite and also to be possessed by the Infinite. He alone holds in the clasp of his hands the clue to the future, his own and the world's !

But the possession of the Infinite is no easy business, " not a happy canter to the goal "[2]; indeed, " the possession of the Infinite cannot come except by an ascent to those supramental planes, nor the knowledge of it except by an inert submission of Mind to the descending messages of the Truth-Conscious Reality."[3] Thought the Paraclete—Thought, our winged intercessor, our comrade, our friend, and the resourceful mediator in our dire distress,—Thought the Paraclete can alone facilitate our ascent " to those supramental planes," it alone can prepare us to receive those " descending messages "; Thought the Paraclete is thus verily a Power and a Personality, and we have but to allow ourselves to be carried by him—in the *marjara* fashion—in utter self-surrender and faith,—and all will be well.

1. *The Life Divine*, I, p. 416.
2. Letter to Dilip.
3. *The Life Divine*, I, p. 248.

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A NOTE ON "THOUGHT THE PARACLETE"

IV.—The Philosophical Background.

Sri Aurobindo wrote several years ago to one of his disciples that *Thought the Paraclete* "does not express any philosophical thought....*it* is simply a perception of a certain movement, that's all." A poem like *Thought the Paraclete* is no doubt no mere footnote to a philosophical treatise of the dimensions of *The Life Divine*; a poem exists, splendorously and triumphantly, in its own sovereign right,—or it is nothing. And *Thought the Paraclete* is truly poetry first and poetry all the time, poetry that just storms the toppling crags of Reality by direct frontal assault, or, to borrow Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's metaphor, leaps "from a centre *within* us to a point of the circumference, and seizes it by direct vision." The reader, too, has boldly to leap likewise from a centre *within* him and seize the meaning of *Thought the Paraclete*; for such poetry has to be apprehended, not with the aid of an elaborate critical exegesis, but by direct vision alone.

While thus the true hearer, like the true creator, of poetry is the soul, the soul only the soul alone, we cannot as yet abolish or wholly ignore the operations of middle terms and muddling instruments like the intellect, the senses, and the imagination. The ear it cannot choose but hear the procession of beautiful sounds, the intellect it cannot choose but depiece the integral framework of the poem, and the imagination it cannot choose but visualize similar experiences in accordance with the laws of its own unique *svabhava* and *svadharma*. These too have their own place—though a strictly subordinate place—in the phenomenon of poetic creation and appreciation. We need not therefore offer a lengthy apology for occasionally yielding, as we do here, to the temptation of talking about and about a poem, instead of leaving it to sink of its own accord deep into one's veiled, stainless, limitless Self. *Thought the Paraclete* is certainly quintessential poetry: but the intellect *would* see in it the

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base, nay the justification, of a whole system of philosophy. Even so the poem but expresses with a radiant finality the inapprehensible Truth that ever disconcertingly evades the mere logician's grasp. The poem gives us, not the philosophical justification for the soul's ascent to the Godhead on the wings of Thought, but rather brings out in one dazzling wave of rhythmic sound the beauty and the glory and the ecstasy of the fact of ascent and triumph and splendid transformation. However, even the votarist of pure poetry will not scorn an intimacy with the philosophical background of the poem, for not only is it illuminating in itself but it also makes easier the necessary final self-surrender to the poem.

The philosophical spiral of reasoning that underlies *Thought the Paraclete* may be summarized in a few sentences. We may start with the axiom that the evolutionary transition from Mind in the Ignorance to Mind in the Knowledge (or conversely, the involutionary transition from Mind in the Knowledge to Mind in the Ignorance) is itself marked by various steps or resting-places or "slow gradations" on the way. After all, it is a fairly "indeterminate" or "intermediate" zone that we are here considering; the dynamics of the sheer physical universe cannot and do not obtain here; only a few reassuring lamp-posts or light-houses glisten in the dim expanse beyond, and we are left to trace out the graph of our fascinating journey with the sole help of these luminous milestones on the way.

Sri Aurobindo mentions four of these discernible "slow gradations"—Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition, and Overmind. Mind starts this particular evolutionary race, Supermind consummates it; and it is Thought the Paraclete that makes the consummation easy, natural, and even inevitable.

Further, according to Sri Aurobindo, ultimate Reality includes the two extreme ends of the evolutionary sweep, Matter and Spirit,—not only includes them, and all that lies

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between them, but at the same time also transcends them, being always Itself, the One without a Second, the Absolute beyond all termini, the Truth beyond all truths; "we start, then, with the conception of an omnipresent Reality of which neither the Non-Being at one end nor the Universe at the other are negations that annul; they are rather different states of Reality, obverse and reverse affirmations." The movement of Involution, starting as a deliberate descent of Consciousness from Sachchidananda, has reached its bottom, its very bottom, in Matter; the counter-movement of Evolution, starting in its turn as an upsurge of Consciousness from Matter, where it is heavily and darkly veiled, has reached the sloping and slippery stage of Mind. One more forward leap is necessary and inevitable,—the leap from Mind to Supermind, touching the four sign-posts of Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition, and Overmind on the way,—and then only would Man be able to fulfil the evolutionary purpose, to exceed himself by outgrowing the limitations of death, desire and incapacity, and partake once and for all in an earthly immortality.

V.—The Four Movements.

At long last we can now tackle the poem itself. The central idea of the poem, which is the transformation in the Self brought about as a result of the ascent of Consciousness to the supramental level, is suggested by the imagery and the music, rather than closely argued out in terms of logical reason. We are expected to proceed from light to light, from one luminous revelation to another, and anon to the next, and so on, till we arrive at and are lost in the rich and illimitable calm of the wonderful finale. To facilitate an

1. *The Life Divine*, I, p. 49.

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analysis of the poem, however, let us divide (alas, we ever "murder to dissect"!) it into four separate movements or discernible sweeps of thought.

First Movement

The opening five lines, constituting the first movement, at once achieve an arresting exordium, and at the same time also suggest through a bold and apt simile the perceived ascent of Thought. "As some bright archangel in vision flies...."; the words cannot but suggest to the reader the Holy Ghost, *the* Paraclete according to Christ; as the Holy Ghost, or the archangel Gabriel or some other bright archangel, plunges headlong into "dream-caught spirit immensities" to meet and redeem the pilgrimaging soul, so "flew my thought"; Man the mental and vital being has been stung to activity by the "pure touch of the spiritual forces"[1]; he has now outgrown sheer instinctive reaction to circumstances and he is no more dazzled by the brilliant systems and delectable castles constructed by empirical knowledge and the mere intelligence; he is now a wanderer in the realms of the invisible, he is indeed, for the time being, groping about himself being "self-lost in the vasts of God." The reference to "green" and "orange" need not puzzle us, the contrast implied being quite natural, both materially and metaphorically. Andrew Marvell too juxtaposes the two colours to suggest a telling contrast:

"*orange* bright
Like golden lamps in a *green* night."[2]

The transition from a purely vital consciousness to a mental one is as noticeable as the shift from "green" to "orange";

1. *The Life Divine*, II, p. 976.
2. *Bermudas*.

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but Thought rises higher still in the scale, seeking other colours in the spectrum of its steep ascent.

Second Movement

The next ten lines constitute the second movement:

> Sleepless wide great glimmering wings of wind
> Bore the gold-red seeking of feet that trod
> Space and Time's mute vanishing ends. The face
> Lustred, pale-blue-lined of the hippogriff,
> Eremite, sole, daring the bourneless ways,
> Over world-bare summits of timeless being
> Gleamed; the deep twilights of the world-abyss
> Failed below. Sun-realms of supernal seeing,
> Crimson-white mooned oceans of pauseless bliss
> Drew its vague heart-yearning with voices sweet.

Thought has managed to grope its way to the stair of ascension and has reached the rung of the Higher Mind, "a mind no longer of mingled light and obscurity or half-light, but a larger clarity of Spirit....a luminous thought-mind, a mind of spirit-born conceptual knowledge."[1] Seeing the One behind the Many, the Higher Mind strives, at any rate conceptually, to get beyond the categories of space and time; and now its prime thirst is to achieve "a mass ideation, a system or totality of truth-seeing at a single view."[2] The term "wings of wind" suggests the living instrument of spiritual Consciousness; "gold-red" is, according to Sri Aurobindo, "the colour of the supramental in the physical,"

1. *The Life Divine*, II, pp. 985-6.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 987.

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or, as he sings in *Flame-Wind* :

Gold in the mind and the life-flame's red
Make of the heavens a splendour, the earth a blaze....[1]

But conceptual knowledge, however comprehensive, is not enough ; it lacks warmth and motion and even spiritual sustenance. Thought therefore cannot rest for ever on the rung of the Higher Mind but must forge further ahead ; as it reaches the level of the Illumined Mind, unity is seen, not alone as a concept, but even as a living reality ; but it is only an intermittent vision that Thought glimpses at this stage. Even then the experience gives a lustre to the face of the mystic seer, so that in him " the soul lives in vision and in a direct sense and experience. "[2] By now Thought the Paraclete has brought the thinker and the seer to the threshold of Intuition ; Thought is the winged hippogriff,[3] " pale-blue-lined "[4] ; he is the all-seeing, all-daring hermit, truly the Pilgrim of Eternity ; he is veritably the sole monarch of his visioned realms. As it touches the intuitive level, Thought acquires the four-fold potencies of truth-seeing, truth-hearing, truth-seizing and truth-correlation[5] and " it brings its own greater radiant movement into the will, into the feelings and emotions, the life impulses, the action of sense and sensation, the very workings of the body consciousness.... A certain integrality can thus take place. "[6] Meanwhile there is an obscuration or ignoration of the seeming dichoto-

1. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 364.
2. *The Life Divine*, II, p. 996.
3. The hippogriff is a " fabulous griffin-like creature with body of horse " (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*). Milton refers to the " wing " of the hippogriff ; and hence Thought may be compared to the hippogriff since both are " winged."
4. According to Sri Aurobindo, " pale-blue " is the colour of the higher ranges of mind up to Intuition." (Letter to a disciple).
5. *The Life Divine*, II, p. 1000.
6. *The Life Divine*, II, p. 1001.

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mies and disharmonies of the world:

the deep twilights of the world-abyss
Failed below.

The harmony from above would seem to have calmed the troubled waters below, so that it is clear that the descent of the higher Consciousness has taken place concurrently with the ascent of the lower one.

The next movement in the ascent reaches up to the Overmind, and now Thought "for the most part no longer seems to originate individually in the body or the person but manifests from above or comes in upon the cosmic mind-waves: all inner individual sight or intelligence of things is now a revelation or illumination of what is seen or comprehended, but the source of the revelation is not in one's separate self but in the universal knowledge; the feelings, emotions, sensations are similarly felt as waves from the same cosmic immensity breaking upon the subtle and the gross body and responded to in kind by the individual centre of the universality; for the body is only a small support or even less, a point of relation, for the action of a vast cosmic instrumentation."[1] Thought has reached "sun-realms of supernal seeing"[2]; it is now a powerful organizer who conceives and executes many "crimson-white[3] mooned oceans of pauseless bliss" and it is a "magician craftsman empowered to weave the multi-coloured warp and woof of manifestation of a single entity in a complex universe."[4]

And yet Thought at the overmental level is mightily restless and knows not the peace of utter fulfilment and

1. *The Life Divine*, II, pp. 1002-3.
2. Cf. "Wisdom supernal looks down on me, knowledge mind cannot measure;
Light that no vision can render garments the silence with splendour."
(*Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 363).
3. "Crimson-white" is the reflection of the Supramental Light.
4. *The Life Divine*, I, p. 431.

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self-knowledge; its "vague"—"vague" because it is still not in possession of the finality and self-luminosity of supramental knowledge—its "vague heart-yearning" no doubt sings songs of a multitudinous variety and also translates them into reality, but even such Thought is only "a power of the lower hemisphere; although its basis is a cosmic unity, its action is an action of division and interaction, an action taking its stand on multiplicity."[1] Overmind cannot obviously be the final resting place of the questing soul of Man.

Third Movement

The third movement describes the final leap, the triumphant landing on the summit of the Supermind. Although the overmental Consciousness "is the highest possible status-dynamis of the spirit in the spiritual-mental plane,"[2] Thought refuses to rest on its oars, but

> Hungering, large-souled to surprise the unconned
> Secrets white-fire-veiled of the last Beyond,
> Crossing power-swept silences rapture-stunned,
> Climbing high far ethers eternal-sunned,
> Thought the great-winged wanderer paraclete
> Disappeared slow-singing a flame-word rune.

Or, as Sri Aurobindo writes elsewhere: "The soul would ....cross its original line of departure from the supreme Knowledge: it would enter into a description of the integrality of the supramental gnosis."[3] This final "canter to the goal" is truly beyond the resources of logical reasoning or verbal portraiture. Thought the Paraclete would seem to

1. *The Life Divine*, II, p. 1006.
2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 1006.
3. *Ibid.*, II, p. 1009.

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have learned the last secret of all, the "flame-word rune,"[1] and "slow-singing" this *mantra* of total emancipation and transfiguration, it disappears into the "last Beyond."[2] The concluding lines of *The Bird of Fire* offer a striking parallel to the third movement in *Thought the Paraclete*:

> One strange leap of thy mystic stress breaking the barriers
> of mind and life, arrives at its luminous term thy
> flight;
> Invading the secret clasp of the Silence and crimson Fire
> thou frontest eyes in a timeless Face.[3]

Fourth Movement

The last line, in and by itself, is the fourth and concluding movement of thought and spray of revelation:

> Self was left, lone, limitless, nude, immune.

The ascent has summoned the corresponding descent; the ego is dead, the self is bare of all the sheaths of the Ignorance, it is for ever immune from death, desire, and incapacity, it is the ONE in very truth, it is the heir to Infinity, Eternity and Immortality.

VI.—Conclusion.

The four movements in *Thought the Paraclete* are but integral parts of a logical and poetical whole. The choice of words and images, the patterning of metre and rhyme, the

1. According to Sri Aurobindo, the "flame-word rune" is "the Word of the Higher Inspiration, Intuition, Revelation, which is the highest attainment of Thought." (Letter to a disciple).

2. Cf. Emily Bronte: "....its home, its harbour found,
Measuring the gulf, it stoops, and dares the final bound."

3. *Collected Poems and Plays*, II, p. 280.

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associations of colour and sound, the careful organization of the four movements, the adequacy and beauty of the structural design, all make *Thought the Paraclete* a profound revelation and a perfect poem. After a minute study of *Thought the Paraclete*, one is inclined to exclaim with Appayya Dikshita :

इत्थं विचित्याः सर्वत्र
भावास्सन्ति पदे पदे।
कवितार्किकसिंहस्य
काव्येषु ललितेष्वपि॥ [1]

1. Commentary on Sri Venkatanatha's *Yadavabhyudaya*, Canto I, Verse 9.

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*Conversations with the Mother

* Originally published for private circulation only, it is now included in the "Words of the Mother."

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